RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE

ALICE B. EMERSON

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AS THE MAD HORSE CIRCLED HER, THE GIRL STRUCK AGAIN AND AGAIN.

Ruth Fielding in the Saddle.

Ruth Fielding In the Saddle

OR

COLLEGE GIRLS IN THE LAND OF GOLD

BY

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING ON CLIFF ISLAND," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Books for Girls

BY ALICE B. EMERSON

RUTH FIELDING SERIES

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RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE
Or, College Girls in the Land of Gold.

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RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE
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RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS COMING

"WILL you do it?" asked the eager, black-eyed girl sitting on the deep window shelf.

"If Mr. Hammond says the synopsis of the picture is all right, I'll go."

"Oh, Ruthie! It would be just—just scrumptious!"

"*We'll* go, Helen—just as we agreed last week," said her chum, laughing happily.

"It will be great! great!" murmured Helen Cameron, her hands clasped in blissful anticipation. "Right into the 'wild and woolly.' Dear me, Ruth Fielding, we *do* have the nicest times—you and I!"

"You needn't overlook me," grumbled the third and rather plump freshman who occupied the most comfortable chair in the chums' study in Dare Hall.

"That would be rather—er—impossible, wouldn't it, Heavy?" suggested Helen Cameron, rolling her black eyes.

Jennie Stone made a face like a street gamin, but otherwise ignored Helen's cruel suggestion. "I'd rather register joy, too——Oh, yes, I'm going with you; have written home about it. Have to tell Aunt Kate ahead, you know. Yes, I'd register joy, if it weren't for one thing that I see looming before us."

"What's that, honey?" asked Ruth.

"The horseback ride from Yucca into the Hualapai Range seems like a doubtful equation to me."

"Don't you mean 'doubtful equestrianism'?" put in the black-eyed girl with a chuckle.

"Perhaps I do," sighed Jennie. "You know, I'm a regular sailor on horseback."

"You should have taken it up when we were all at Silver Ranch with Ann Hicks," Ruth said.

"Oh, say not so!" begged Jennie Stone lugubriously. "What I should have done in the past has nothing to do with this coming summer. I groan to think of what I shall have to endure."

"Who will do the groaning for the horse that has to carry you, Heavy?" interposed the irrepressible Helen, giving her the old nickname that Jennie Stone now scarcely deserved.

"Never mind. Let the horse do his own worrying," was the placid reply. The temper of the well nourished girl was not easily ruffled.

"Why, Jennie, *think!*" ejaculated Helen, suddenly turned brisk and springing down from the window seat. "It will be just the jaunt for you. The physical culturists claim there is nothing so good for reducing flesh and helping one's poor, sluggish liver as horseback riding."

"Say!" drawled the other girl, her nose tilted at a scornful angle, "those people say a lot more than their prayers—believe me! Most physical culturists have never ridde any kind of horse in their lives but a hobbyhorse—and they still ride *that* when they are senile."

Ruth applauded. "A Daniel come to judgment!" she cried.

"Huh!" sniffed Jennie, suspiciously. "What does that mean?"

"I—I don't just know myself," confessed Ruth. "But it sounds good—and Dr. Milroth used it this morning in chapel, so it must be all right."

"Anything that our revered dean says goes big with me, I confess," said Jennie. "Oh, girls! isn't she just a dear?"

"And hasn't Ardmore been just the delightsomest place for nine months?" cried Helen.

"Even better than Briarwood," agreed Ruth.

"That sounds almost sacrilegious," Helen observed. "I don't know about any place being finer than old Briarwood."

"There's Ann!" cried Ruth in a tone that made both the others jump.

"Where? Where?" demanded Helen, whirling about to look out of the window again. The window gave a broad view of the lower slope of College Hill and the expanse of Lake Remona. Dusk was just dropping, for the time was after dinner; but objects were still to be clearly observed. "Where's Jane Ann Hicks?"

"Just completing her full course at Briarwood Hall," Ruth explained demurely. "She will go to Montana, of course. But if I write her I know she'll join us at Yucca just for the fun of the ride."

"Some people's idea of fun!" groaned Jennie.

"What are *you* attempting to go for, then?" demanded Helen, somewhat wonderingly.

"Because I think it is my duty," the plump girl declared. "You young and flighty freshies aren't fit to go so far without somebody solid along——"

" 'Solid!' You said it!" scoffed Helen.

"I was referring to character, Miss Cameron," returned the other shaking her head. "But Ann is certainly a good fellow. I hope she will go, Ruth."

"I declare, Ruthie," exclaimed her chum, "you are getting up a regular party!"

"Why not?"

"It *will* be great fun," acknowledged the black-eyed girl.

"Of course it will, goosie," said Jennie Stone. "Isn't everything that Ruth Fielding plans always fun? Say, Ruth, there are some girls right here at Ardmore—and freshies, too—who would be tickled to death to join us."

"Goodness!" objected Ruth, laughing at her friend's exuberance. "I wouldn't wish to be the cause of a general massacre, so perhaps we'd better not invite any of the other girls."

"Little Davenport would go," Jennie pursued. "She's a regular bear on a pony."

"Bareback riding, do you mean, Heavy?" drawled Helen.

Except for a look, which she hoped was withering, this was ignored by the plump girl, who went on: "Trix would jump at the chance, Ruth. You know, she has no regular home. She's just passed around from one family of relations to another during vacations. She told me so."

"Would her guardian agree?" asked Ruth.

"Nothing easier. She told me he wouldn't care if she joined that party that's going to start for the south pole this season. He's afraid of girls. He's an old bachelor—and a misogynist."

"Goodness!" murmured Helen. "There should be something done about letting such savage animals be at large."

"It's no fun for poor little Trix," said Jennie.

"She shall be asked," Ruth declared. "And Sally Blanchard."

"Oh, yes!" cried Helen. "She owns a horse, and has been riding three times a week all this spring. Her father believes that horseback riding keeps the doctor away."

"Improvement on 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away,'" quoted Ruth.

"How about eating an onion a day?" put in Jennie. "That will keep everybody away!"

"Oh, Jennie, we're not getting anywhere!" declared Helen Cameron. "*Are* you going to invite a bunch of girls, Ruth, to go West with us?"

This is how the idea germinated and took root. Ruth and Helen had talked over the possibility of making the trip into the Hualapai Range for more than a fortnight; but nothing had as yet been planned in detail.

Mr. Hammond, president of the Alectrion Film Corporation had conceived the idea of a spectacular production on the screen of "The Forty-Niners"—as the title implied, a picture of the early gold digging in the West. He had heard of an abandoned mining camp in Mohave County, Arizona, which could easily and cheaply be put into the condition it was before its inhabitants stampeded for other gold diggings.

Mr. Hammond desired to have most of the

scenes taken at Freezeout Camp and he had talked over the plot of the story with Ruth Fielding, whose previous successes as a scenario writer were remarkable. The producer wished, too, that Ruth should visit the abandoned mining camp to get her "local color" and to be on the scene when his company arrived to make the films.

There was a particular reason, too, why Ruth had a more than ordinary interest in this proposed production. Instead of being paid outright for her work as the writer of the scenario, some of her own money was to be invested in the picture. Having taken up the making of motion pictures seriously and hoping to make it her livlihood after graduating from college, Ruth wished her money as well as her brains to work for her.

Nor was the president of the Alectrion Film Corporation doing an unprecedented thing in making this arrangement. In this way the shrewd capitalists behind the great film-making companies have obtained the best work from chief directors, the most brilliant screen stars, and the more successful scenario writers. To give those who show special talent in the chief departments of the motion picture industry a financial interest in the work, has proved gainful to all concerned.

Ruth had walked slowly to the window, and she stood a moment looking out into the warm June dusk. The campus was deserted, but lights

glimmered everywhere in the windows of the Ardmore dormitories. This was the evening before Commencement Day and most of the seniors and juniors were holding receptions, or "tea fights."

"What do you think, girls?" Ruth said thoughtfully. "Of course, we'll have to have the guide Mr. Hammond spoke about, and a pack-train anyway. And the more girls the merrier."

"Bully!" breathed the slangy Miss Stone, wiggling in her chair.

"Oh, I vote we do, Ruth. Have 'em all meet at Yucca and——"

Suddenly Ruth cried out and sprang back from the window.

"What's the matter, dear?" asked Helen, rushing over to her and seizing her chum's arm.

"What bit you, Ruth Fielding? A mosquito?" demanded Jennie.

"Sh! girls," breathed the girl of the Red Mill softly. "There's somebody just under this window—on the ledge!"

CHAPTER II

EAVESDROPPING

HELEN tiptoed to the window and peered out suddenly. She expected to catch the eavesdropper, but——

"Why, there's nobody here, Ruth," she complained.

"No-o?"

"Not a soul. The ledge is bare away to the end. You—you must have been mistaken, dear."

Ruth looked out again and Jennie Stone crowded in between them, likewise eager to see.

"I know there was a girl there," whispered Ruth. "She lay right under this window."

"But what for? Trying to scare us?" asked Helen.

"Trying to break her own neck, I should think," sniffed Jennie. "Who'd risk climbing along this ledge?"

"*I* have," confessed Helen. "It's not such a stunt. Other girls have."

"But *why?*" demanded the plump freshman. "What was she here for?"

"Listening, I tell you," Helen said.

"To what? We weren't discussing buried treasure—or even any personal scandal," laughed Jennie. "What do you think, Ruth?"

"That is strange," murmured the girl of the Red Mill reflectively.

"The strangest thing is where she could have gone so quickly," said Helen.

"Pshaw! around the corner—the nearest corner, of course," observed Jennie with conviction.

"Oh! I didn't think of that," cried Ruth, and went to the other window, for the study shared during their freshman year by her and Helen Cameron was a corner room with windows looking both west and south.

When the trio of puzzled girls looked out of the other open window, however, the wide ledge of sandstone which ran all around Dare Hall just beneath the second story windows was deserted.

"Who lives along that way?" asked Jennie, meaning the occupants of the several rooms the windows of which overlooked the ledge on the west side of the building.

"Why—May MacGreggor for one," said Helen. "But it wouldn't be May. She's not snoopy."

"I should say not! Nor is Rebecca Frayne," Ruth said. "She has the fifth room away. And girls! I believe Rebecca would be delighted to go with us to Arizona."

"Oh—well——Could she go?" asked Helen pointedly.

"Perhaps. Maybe it can be arranged," Ruth said reflectively.

She seemed to wish to lead the attention of the other two from the mystery of the girl she had observed on the ledge. But Helen, who knew her so well, pinched Ruth's arm and whispered:

"I believe you know who it was, Ruthie Fielding. You can't fool me."

"Sh!" admonished her friend, and because Ruth's influence was very strong with the black-eyed girl, the latter said no more about the mystery just then.

Ruth Fielding's influence over Helen had begun some years before—indeed, almost as soon as Ruth herself, a heart-sore little orphan, had arrived at the Red Mill to live with her Uncle Jabez and his little old housekeeper, Aunt Alvirah, "who was nobody's relative, but everybody's aunt."

Helen and her twin brother, Tom Cameron, were the first friends Ruth made, and in the first volume of this series of stories, entitled, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," is related the birth and

growth of this friendship. Ruth and Helen go to Briarwood Hall for succeeding terms until they are ready for college; and their life there and their adventures during their vacations at Snow Camp, at Lighthouse Point, at Silver Ranch, at Cliff Island, at Sunrise Farm, with the Gypsies, in Moving Pictures and Down in Dixie are related in successive volumes.

Following this first vacation trip Ruth and Helen, with their old chum Jennie Stone, entered Ardmore College, and in "Ruth Fielding at College; Or, The Missing Examination Papers," the happenings of the chums' freshman year at this institution for higher education are narrated.

The present story, the twelfth of the series, opens during the closing days of the college year. Ruth's plans for the summer—or for the early weeks of it at least—are practically made.

The trip West, into the Hualapai Range of Arizona for the business of making a moving picture of "The Forty-Niners" had already stirred the imagination of Ruth and her two closest friends. But the idea of forming a larger party to ride through the wilds from Yucca to Freezeout Camp was a novel one.

"It will be great fun," said Helen again. "Of course, old Tom will go along anyway——"

"To chaperon us," giggled Jennie.

"No. To see we don't fall out of our saddles,"

Ruth laughed. "Now! let's think about it, girls, and decide on whom we shall invite."

"Trix and Sally," Jennie said.

"And Ann Hicks!" cried Helen. "You write to her, Ruth."

"I will to-night," promised her chum. "And I'm going to speak to Rebecca Frayne at once."

"I'll see Beatrice," stated Jennie, moving toward the door.

"And I'll run and ask Sally. She's a good old scout," said Helen.

But as soon as the plump girl had departed, Helen flung herself upon Ruth. "Who was she? Tell me, quick!" she demanded.

"The girl under that window?"

"Of course. You know, Ruthie."

"I—I suspect," her chum said slowly.

"Tell me!"

"Edie Phelps."

"There!" exclaimed Helen, her black eyes fairly snapping with excitement. "I thought so."

"You did?" asked Ruth, puzzled. "Why should she be listening to us? She's never shown any particular interest in us Briarwoods."

"But for a week or two I've noticed her hanging around. It's something concerning this vacation trip she wants to find out about, I believe."

"Why, how odd!" Ruth said. "I can't understand it."

"I wish we'd caught her," said Helen, sharply, for she did not like the sophomore in question. Edith Phelps had been something of a "thorn in the flesh" to the chums during their freshman year.

"Well, I don't know," Ruth murmured. "It would only have brought on another quarrel with her. We'd better ignore it altogether I think."

"Humph!" sniffed Helen. "That doesn't satisfy my curiosity; and I'm frank to confess that I'm bitten deep by *that* microbe."

"Oh well, my dear," said Ruth, teasingly, "there are many things in this life it is better you should not know. Ahem! I'm going to see Rebecca."

Helen ran off, too, to Sarah Blanchard's room. Many of the girls' doors were ajar and there was much visiting back and forth on this last evening; while the odor of tea permeated every nook and cranny of Dare Hall.

Rebecca's door was closed, however, as Ruth expected. Rebecca Frayne was not as yet socially popular at Ardmore—not even among the girls of her own class.

In the first place she had come to college with an entirely wrong idea of what opportunities for higher education meant for a girl. Her people were very poor and very proud—a family of old New England stock that looked down upon those who achieved success "in trade."

Had it not been for Ruth Fielding's very good sense, and her advice and aid, Rebecca could never have remained at Ardmore to complete her freshman year. During this time, and especially toward the last of the school year, she had learned some things of importance besides what was contained within the covers of her textbooks.

But Ruth worried over the possibility that before their sophomore year should open in September, the influence at home would undo all the good Rebecca Frayne had gained.

"I've just the thing for you, Becky!" Ruth Fielding cried, carrying her friend's study by storm. "What do you think?"

"Something nice, I presume, Ruth Fielding. You always *are* doing something uncommonly kind for me."

"Nonsense!"

"No nonsense about it. I was just wondering what I should ever do without you all this long summer."

"That's it!" cried Ruth, laughing. "You're not going to get rid of me so easily."

"What do you mean?" asked Rebecca, wonderingly.

"That you'll go with us. I need you badly, Becky. You've learned to rattle the typewriter so nicely——"

"Want me to get an office position for the

summer near you?" Rebecca asked, the flush rising in her cheek.

"Better than that," declared Ruth, ignoring Rebecca's flush and tone of voice. "You know, I told you we are going West."

"You and Cameron? Yes."

"And Jennie Stone, and perhaps others. But I want you particularly."

"Oh, Ruth Fielding! I couldn't! You know just how *dirt poor* we are. It's all Buddie can do to find the money for my soph year here. No! It is impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible. 'In the bright lexicon of youth,' and so forth. You can go if you will."

"I couldn't accept such a great kindness, Ruth," Rebecca said, in her hard voice.

"Better wait till you learn how terribly kind I am," laughed Ruth. "I have an axe to grind, my dear."

"An axe!"

"Yes, indeedy! I want you to help me. I really do."

"To *write?*" gasped Rebecca. "You know very well, Ruth Fielding, that I can scarcely compose a decent letter. I *hate* that form of human folly known as 'Lit-ra-choor.' I couldn't do it."

"No," said Ruth, smiling demurely. "I am going to write my own scenario. But I will get a portable typewriter, and I want you to copy my

stuff. Besides, there will be several copies to make, and some work after the director gets there. Oh, you'll have no sinecure! And if you'll go and do it, I'll put up the money but you'll be paying all the expenses, Becky. What say?"

Ruth knew very well that if she had offered to pay Rebecca a salary the foolishly proud girl would never have accepted. But she had put it in such a way that Rebecca Frayne could not but accept.

"You dear!" she said, with her arms about Ruth's neck and displaying as she seldom did the real love she felt for the girl of the Red Mill. "I'll do it. I've an old riding habit of auntie's that I can make over. And of course, I can ride."

"You'd better make your habit into bloomers and a divided skirt," laughed Ruth. "That's how Jane Ann—and Helen and Jennie, too—will dress, as well as your humble servant. There *are* women who ride sidesaddle in the West; but they do not ride into the rough trails that we are going to attempt. In fact, most of 'em wear trousers outright."

"Goodness! My aunt would have a fit," murmured Rebecca Frayne.

CHAPTER III

THE LETTER FROM YUCCA

BEFORE Dare Hall was quiet that night it was known throughout the dormitory that six girls of the freshman class were going to spend a part of the summer vacation in the wilds of Arizona.

"Like enough we'll never see any of them again," declared May MacGreggor. "The female of the species is scarce in 'them parts,' I understand. They will all six get married to cowboys, or gold miners, or——"

"Or movie actors," snapped Edith Phelps, with a toss of her head. "I presume Fielding is quite familiar with any quantity of 'juvenile leads' and 'stunt' actors as well as 'custard-pie comedians.' "

"Oh, behave, Edie!" chuckled the Scotch girl. "I'd love to go with 'em myself, but I must help mother take care of the children this summer. There's a wild bunch of 'loons' at my house."

Fortunately, Helen Cameron did not hear Edith's criticism. Helen had a sharp tongue of her own and she had no fear now of the sopho-

more. Indeed, both Ruth and Helen had quite forgotten over night their suspicions regarding the girl at their study window. They arose betimes and went for a last run around the college grounds in their track suits, as they had been doing for most of the spring. The chums had gone in for athletics as enthusiastically at Ardmore as they had at Briarwood Hall.

Just as they set out from the broad front steps of Dare and rounded the corner of the building toward the west, Ruth stopped with a little cry. There at her feet lay a letter.

"Somebody's dropped a billet-doux," said Helen. "Or is it just an envelope?"

Ruth picked it up and turned it over so that she could see its face. "The letter is in it," she said. "And it's been opened. Why, Helen!"

"Yes?"

"It's for Edie Phelps."

Helen had already glanced upward. "And right under our windows," she murmured. "I bet she dropped it when——"

"I suppose she did," said Ruth, as her chum's voice trailed off into silence. Suddenly Helen, who was looking at the face of the envelope, gasped.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "See the return address in the corner?"

"Wha—— Why, it says: 'Box 24, R. F. D., Yucca, Arizona!' "

"Yucca, Arizona," repeated Helen. "Just where we are going. Ruth! there is something very mysterious about this. Do you realize it?"

"It is the oddest thing!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Edith getting letters from out there and then creeping along that ledge under our windows to listen. Well, I'd give a cent to know what's in that letter."

"Oh, Helen! We couldn't," cried Ruth, quickly, folding the envelope and slipping it between the buttons of her blouse.

"Just the same," declared her chum, "she was eavesdropping on us. We ought to be excused if we did a little eavesdropping on her by reading her letter."

But Ruth set off immediately in a good, swinging trot, and Helen had to close her lips and put her elbows to her sides to keep up with her. Later, when they had taken their morning shower and had dressed and all the girls were trooping down the main stairway of Dare Hall in answer to the breakfast call, Ruth spied Edith Phelps and hailed her, drawing the letter from her bosom.

"Hi, Edith Phelps! Here's something that belongs to you."

The sophomore turned quickly to face the girl of the Red Mill, and with no pleasant expression of countenance. "What have you there?" she snapped.

"A letter that you dropped," said Ruth, quietly.

"That *I* dropped?" and she came quickly to seize the proffered missive. "Ha! I suppose you took pains to read it?"

Ruth drew back, paling. The thrust hurt her cruelly and although she would not reply, the sophomore's gibe did not go without answer. Helen's black eyes flashed as she stepped in front of her chum.

"I can assure you Ruth and I do not read other people's correspondence any more than we listen to other people's private conversation, Phelps," she said directly. "We found that letter *under our window where you dropped it last night!*"

Ruth caught at her arm; but the stroke went home. Edith Phelps' face reddened and then paled. Without further speech she hurried away with the letter gripped tightly in her hand. She did not appear at breakfast.

"It's terrible to be always ladylike," sighed Helen to Ruth. "I just *know* we have seen one end of a mystery. And that's all we are likely to see."

"It is the most mysterious thing why Phelps should be interested in our affairs, and be getting letters from Yucca," admitted Ruth.

The chums had no further opportunity of talking this matter over, for it was at breakfast that Rebecca Frayne threw her bomb. At least, Jen-

nie Stone said it was such. Rebecca came over to Miss Comstock's table where the chums and Jennie sat and demanded:

"Ruth Fielding! who is going to chaperon your party?"

"What? Chaperon?" murmured Ruth, quite taken aback by the question.

"Of course. You say Helen's brother is going. And there will be a guide and other men. We've got to have a chaperon."

"Oh!" gasped Helen. "Poor old Tommy! If he knew that! He won't bite you, Rebecca."

"You girls certainly wouldn't dream of going on that long journey unless you were properly attended?" cried Rebecca, horrified.

"What do you think we need?" demanded Jennie Stone. "A trained nurse, or a governess?"

Rebecca was thoroughly shocked. "My aunt would never hear of such a proceeding," she affirmed. "Oh, Ruth Fielding! I want to go with you; but, of course, there must be some older woman with us."

"Of course—I presume so," sighed Ruth. "I hadn't thought that far."

"Whom shall we ask?" demanded Helen. "Mrs. Murchiston won't go. She's struck. She says she is too old to go off with any harum-scarum crowd of school girls again."

"I like that!" exclaimed Jennie, in a tone that

showed she did not like it at all. "We have got past the hobbledehoy age, I should hope."

Miss Comstock, the senior at their table, had become interested in the affair, and she suggested pleasantly:

"We Ardmores often try to get the unattached members of the faculty to fill the breach in such events as this. Try Miss Cullam."

"Oh, dear me!" muttered Helen.

Ruth said briskly, "Miss Cullam is just the person. Do you suppose she has her summer free, Miss Comstock?"

"She was saying only last evening that she had made no plans."

"She shall make 'em at once," declared Ruth, jumping up and leaving her breakfast. "Excuse me, Miss Comstock. I am going to find Miss Cullam, instantly."

It was Miss Cullam, too, who had worried most about the lost examination papers which Ruth had been the means of finding (as related in "Ruth Fielding at College"); and the instructor of mathematics had taken a particular interest in the girl of the Red Mill and her personal affairs.

"I haven't ridden horseback since I was a girl," she said, in some doubt. "And, my *dear!* you do not expect me to ride a-straddle as girls do nowadays? Never!"

"Neither will Rebecca," chuckled Ruth. "But

we who have been on the plains before, know that a divided skirt is a blessing to womankind."

"I do not think I shall need that particular blessing," Miss Cullam said, rather grimly. "But I believe I will accept your invitation, Ruth Fielding. Though perhaps it is not wise for instructors and pupils to spend their vacations together. The latter are likely to lose their fear of us——"

"Oh, Miss Cullam! There isn't one of us who has a particle of fear of you," laughed Ruth.

"Ahem! that is why some of you do not stand so well in mathematics as you should," said the teacher dryly.

That was a busy day; but the party Ruth was forming made all their plans, subject, of course, to agreement by their various parents and guardians. In one week they were to meet in New York, prepared to make the long journey by train to Yucca, Arizona, and from that point into the mountains on horseback.

Helen found time for a little private investigation; but it was not until she and Ruth were on the way home to Cheslow in the parlor car that she related her meager discoveries to her chum.

"What did you ever learn about Edie Phelps?" Helen asked.

"Oh! Edie? I had forgotten about her."

"Well, I didn't forget. The mystery piques me, as the story writers say," laughed Helen.

"Do you know that her father is an awfully rich man?"

"Why, no. Edith doesn't make a point of telling everybody perhaps," returned Ruth, smiling.

"No; she doesn't. You've got to hand it to her for that. But, then, to blow about one's wealth is about as crude a thing as one can do, isn't it?"

"Well, what about Edith's father?" asked Ruth, curiously.

"Nothing particular. Only he is one of our 'captains of industry' that the Sunday papers tell about. Makes oodles of money in mines, so I was told. Edith has no mother. She had a brother——"

"Oh! is he dead?" cried Ruth, with sympathy.

"Perhaps he'd better be. He was rusticated from his college last year. It was quite a scandal. His father disowned him and he disappeared. Edith felt awfully, May says."

"Too bad," sighed Ruth.

"Why, of course, it's too bad," grumbled Helen. "But that doesn't help us find out why Edie is so much interested in our going to Yucca; nor how she comes to be in correspondence with anybody in that far, far western town. What do you think it means, Ruthie?"

"I haven't the least idea," declared the girl of the Red Mill, shaking her head.

CHAPTER IV

A WEEK AT HOME

MR. CAMERON met the chums *en route,* and the next morning they arrived at Seven Oaks in time to see Tom receive his diploma from the military and preparatory school. Tom, black-eyed and as handsome in his way as Helen was in hers, seemed to have interest only in Ruth.

"Goodness me! that boy's got a regular crush on you, Ruthie!" exclaimed Helen, exasperated. "Did you ever see the like?"

"Dear Tom!" sighed Ruth Fielding. "He was the very first friend—of my own age, I mean—that I found in Cheslow when I went there. I *have* to be good to Tommy, you know."

"But he's only a boy!" cried the twin sister, feeling herself to be years older than her brother after spending so many months at college.

"He was born the same day you were," laughed Ruth.

"That makes no difference. Boys are never as wise or as old as girls——"

"Until the girls slip along too far. Then they sometimes want to appear young instead of old," said the girl of the Red Mill practically. "I suppose, in the case of girls who have not struck out for themselves and gone to college or into business or taken up seriously one of the arts, it is so the boys will continue to pay them attentions. Thank goodness, Helen! you and I will be able to paddle our own canoes without depending upon any 'mere male,' as Miss Cullam calls them, for our bread and butter."

"*You* certainly can paddle your own boat," Helen returned admiringly, leaving the subject of the "mere male." "Father says you have become a smart business woman already. He approves of this venture you are going to make in the movies."

But Uncle Jabez did not approve. Ruth had written to Aunt Alvirah regarding the manner in which she expected to spend the summer, and there was a storm brewing when she reached the Red Mill.

Set upon the bank of the Lumano River, the old red mill with the sprawling, comfortable story-and-a-half farmhouse attached, made a very pretty picture indeed—so pretty that already one of Ruth's best scenarios had been filmed at the mill and people all over the country were able to see just how beautiful the locality was.

When Ruth got out of the automobile that had

brought them all from the Cheslow station and ran up the shaded walk to the porch, a little, hoop-backed old woman came almost running to the door to greet her—a dear old creature with a face like a withered russet apple and very bright, twinkling eyes.

"Oh, my pretty! Oh, my pretty!" Aunt Alvirah cried. "I feared you never *would* come."

"Why, Auntie!" Ruth murmured, taking Aunt Alvirah in her arms and leading her back to the low rocking chair by the window where she usually sat.

There was a rosy-cheeked country girl hovering over the supper table, who smiled bashfully at the college girl. Uncle Jabez, as he had promised, had hired somebody to relieve the little old woman of the heaviest of her housekeeping burdens.

"Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!" groaned Aunt Alvirah as she settled back into her chair. "Dear child! how glad we shall be to have you at home, if only for so short a while."

"What does Uncle Jabez say?" whispered Ruth.

"He don't approve, Ruthie. You know, he never has approved of your doing things that other gals don't do."

"But, Aunt Alvirah, other girls *do* do them. Can't he understand that the present generation of

girls is different from his mother's generation?"

Aunt Alvirah wagged her head seriously. "I'm afraid not, my pretty. Jabez Potter ain't one to l'arn new things easy. You know that."

Ruth nodded thoughtfully. She expected a scene with the old miller and she was not disappointed. It came after supper—after Uncle Jabez had retired to the sitting-room to count his day's receipts as usual; and likewise to count the hoard of money he always kept in his cash-box.

Uncle Jabez Potter was of a miserly disposition. Aunt Alvirah often proclaimed that the coming of his grand-niece to the Red Mill had barely saved the old man from becoming utterly bound up in his riches. Sometimes Ruth could scarcely see how he could have become more miserly than he already was.

"No, Niece Ruth, I don't approve. You knowed I couldn't approve of no sech doin's as this you're attemptin'. It's bad enough for a gal to waste her money in l'arnin' more out o' books than what a man knows. But to go right ahead and do as she plumb pleases with five thousand dollars—or what ye've got left of it after goin' off to college and sech nonsense. No——"

The miller's feelings on the subject were too deep for further utterance. Ruth said, firmly:

"You know, Uncle Jabez, the money was given to me to do what I pleased with."

"Another foolish thing," snarled Uncle Jabez. "That Miz Parsons had no business to give ye five thousand dollars for gettin' back her necklace from the Gypsies—a gal like you!"

"But she had offered the reward to anybody who would find it," Ruth explained patiently.

Uncle Jabez ploughed right through this statement and shook his head like an angry bull. "And then the court had no business givin' it over to Mister Cameron to take care on't for ye. *I* was the proper person to be made your guardeen."

Ruth had no reply to make to this. She knew well enough that she would never have touched any of the money until she was of age had Uncle Jabez once got his hands upon it.

"The money's airnin' ye good int'rest in the Cheslow bank. That's where it oughter stay. Wastin' it makin' them foolish movin' pictuers——"

"But, Uncle!" she told him desperately; "you know that my scenarios are earning money. See how much money my 'Heart of a Schoolgirl' has made for the building of the new dormitory at Briarwood. And this last picture that Mr. Hammond took here at the mill is bound to sell big."

"Huh!" grunted the miller, not much impressed. "Mebbe it's all right for you to spend your spare time writin' them things; but it ain't no re'l business. Can't tell me!"

"But it *is* a business—a great, money-making business," sighed Ruth. "And I am determined to have my part in it. It is my chance, Uncle Jabez—my chance to begin something lasting——"

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" he declared angrily. "Ye'll lose your money—that's what ye'll do. But lemme tell you, young lady, if you do lose it, don't ye come back here to the Red Mill expectin' me ter support ye in idleness. For I won't do it—I won't do it!" and he stamped away to bed.

The few days she spent at home were busy ones for Ruth Fielding. Naturally, she and Helen had to do some shopping.

"For even if we are bound for the wilds of Arizona, there will be men to see us," said the black-eyed girl frankly. "And it is the duty of all females to preen their feathers for the males."

"Just so," growled her twin. "I expect I shall have to stand with a gun in both hands to keep those wild cowpunchers and miners away from you two when we reach Yucca. I remember how it was at Silver Ranch—and you were only kids then."

"'Kids,' forsooth!" cried his sister. "When will you ever learn to have respect for us, Tommy? Remember we are college girls."

"Oh! you aren't likely to let anybody forget that fact," grumbled Tom, who felt a bit chagrined to

think that his sister and her chum had arrived at college a year ahead of him. He would enter Harvard in the fall.

During this busy week, Ruth spent as much time as possible with Aunt Alvirah, for the little old woman showed that she longed for "her pretty's" company. Uncle Jabez went about with a thundercloud upon his face and disapproval in his every act and word.

Before Saturday a telegram came from Ann Hicks. She had arrived at Silver Ranch, conferred with Uncle Bill, and it was agreed that she should meet Ruth and the other girls at Yucca on the date Ruth had named in her letter. The addition of Ann to the party from the East would make it nine strong, including Miss Cullam as chaperon and Tom Cameron as "courier."

Tom was to make all the traveling arrangements, and he went on to New York a day before Ruth and Helen started from Cheslow. There he had a small experience which afterward proved to be important. At the time it puzzled him a good deal.

It had been agreed that the party bound for Arizona should meet at the Delorphion Hotel. Therefore, Tom took a taxicab at the Grand Central Terminal for that hostlery. Mr. Cameron had engaged rooms for the whole party by telephone, for he was well known at the Delorphion,

and all Tom had to do was to hand the clerk at the desk his card and sign his name with a flourish on the register.

The instant he turned away from the desk to follow the bellhop Tom noted a young man, after a penetrating glance at him, slide along to the register, twirl it around again, and examine the line he, Tom, had written there. The young fellow was a stranger to Tom. He was dressed like a chauffeur. Tom was sure he had never seen the young man before.

"Now, wouldn't that bother you?" he muttered, eyeing the fellow sharply as he crossed the marble-floored rotunda to the elevators. "Does he think he knows me? Or is he looking for somebody and is putting every new arrival through the third degree?"

He half expected the chauffeur person to follow him to the elevator, and he lingered behind the impatient bellhop for half a minute to give the stranger a chance to accost him if he wished to.

But immediately after the fellow had read Tom's name on the book, he turned away and went out, without vouchsafing him another glance.

"Funny," thought Tom Cameron. "Wonder what it means."

However, as nothing more came of it—at least, not at once—he buried the mystery under the manifold duties of the day. He met a couple of school

friends at noon and went to lunch with them; but he returned to the hotel for dinner.

It was then he spied the same chauffeur again. He was helping a young lady out of a private car before the hotel entrance and a porter was going in ahead with two big traveling bags.

Tom was sure it was the same man who had examined the hotel register after he had signed his name; and he was tempted to stop and speak to him. But the young lady whisked into the hotel without his seeing her face, while the chauffeur, after a curious, straight stare at Tom, jumped into the car and started away. Tom noticed that there was a monogram upon the motor-car door, but he did not notice the license number.

"Maybe the girl is one of those going with us," Tom thought, as he went inside.

The porter with the bags and the young lady in question has disappeared. He went to the desk and asked the clerk if any of his party had arrived and was informed to the contrary.

"Well, it gets me," ruminated Tom, as he went up to dress for dinner. "I don't know whether I am the subject of a strange young lady's attentions, or merely if the chauffeur was curious about me. Guess I won't say anything to the girls about it. Helen would surely give me the laugh."

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL IN LOWER FIVE

Tom and his father had visited his sister and Ruth at Ardmore; the young fellow was no stranger to the girls whom Ruth had invited to join the party bound for Freezeout Camp. Of course, Jennie Stone knew Helen's black-eyed twin from old times when they were children.

"Dear me, how you've grown, Tommy!" observed the plump girl, looking Tom over with approval.

"For the first time since I've known you, Jennie, I cannot return the compliment," Tom said seriously.

"Gee!" sighed the erstwhile fat girl, ecstatically, "am I not glad!"

That next day all arrived. Ruth and Helen were the last, they reaching the hotel just before bedtime. But Tom was forever wandering through the foyer and parlors to spy a certain hat and figure that he was sure he should know again. He was tempted to tell Helen and her chums about

the chauffeur and the strange young lady while they were all enjoying a late supper.

"However, a man alone, with such a number of girls, has to be mighty careful," so Tom told himself, "that they don't get something on him. They'd rig me to death, and I guess Tommy had better keep his tongue between his teeth."

The train on which the party had obtained reservations left the Pennsylvania Station at ten o'clock in the forenoon. Half an hour before that time Tom came down to the hotel entrance ahead of the girls and instructed the starter to bespeak two taxicabs.

As Tom stepped out of the wide-open door he saw the motor-car with the monogram on the door, the same chauffeur driving, and the girl with the "stunning" hat in the tonneau. The car was just moving away from the door and it was but a fleeting glimpse Tom obtained of it and its occupants. They did not even glance at him.

"Guess I was fooling myself after all," he muttered. "At any rate, I fancy they aren't so greatly interested. They're not following us, that's sure."

The girls came hurrying down, with Miss Cullam in tow, all carrying their hand baggage. Trunks had gone on ahead, although Ruth had warned them all that, once off the train at Yucca, only the most necessary articles of apparel could be packed into the mountain range.

"Remember, we are dependent upon burros for the transportation of our luggage; and there are only just about so many of the cunning little things in all Arizona. We can't transport too large a wardrobe."

"Are the burros as cunning as they say they are?" asked Trix Davenport.

"All of that," said Tom. "And great singers."

"Sing? Now you are spoofing!" declared the coxswain of Ardmore's freshman eight.

"All right. You wait and see. You know what they call 'em out there? Mountain canaries. Wait till you hear a love-lorn burro singing to his mate. Oh, my!"

"The idea!" ejaculated Miss Cullam. "What does the boy mean by 'love-lorn'?"

It was a hilarious party that alighted from the taxicabs in the station and made its way to the proper part of the trainshed. The sleeping car was a luxurious one, and when the train pulled out and dived into the tunnel under the Hudson ("just like a woodchuck into its hole," Trix said) they were comfortably established in their seats.

Tom had secured three full sections for the girls. Miss Cullam had Lower Two while Tom himself had Upper Five. There was some slight discussion over this latter section, for the berth under Tom had been reserved for a lady.

"Well, that's all right," said Tom philosoph-

ically. "If she can stand it, *I* can. Let the conductor fight it out with her."

"Perhaps she will want you to sleep out on the observation platform, Tommy," said Jennie Stone, wickedly. "To be gallant you'd do it, of course?"

"Of course," said Tom, stoutly. "Far be it from me to add to the burden on the mind of any female person. It strikes me that they are mostly in trouble about something all the time."

"Oh, oh!" cried Helen. "Villain! Is that the way I've brought you up?"

Tom grinned at his sister wickedly. "Somehow your hand must have slipped when you were molding me, Sis. What d'you think?"

When the time came to retire, however, there was no objection made by the lady who had reserved Lower Five. Of course, in these sleeping cars the upper and lower berths were so arranged that they were entirely separate. But in the morning Tom chanced to be coming from his berth just as the lady started down the corridor for the dressing room.

"My!" thought Tom. "That's some pretty girl. Who——"

Then he caught a glimpse of her face, just as she turned it hastily from him. He had seen it once before—just as a certain motor-car was drawing away from the front of the Delorphion Hotel.

"Huh!" said Tom suspiciously. "What's up your sleeve, Ruth?"

"My arm!" she cried, and ran back to the other girls and Miss Cullam, laughing at him.

Edith's presence on this train was puzzling.

"That was a man's handwriting on the envelope Helen and I picked up addressed to Edith," Ruth told herself. "Some man has been writing to her from that Mohave County town. Who? And what for?"

"Not that it is really any of my business," she concluded.

She did not take Helen into her confidence in the matter. Let the other girls see Edith Phelps if they chanced to; she determined to stir up no "hurrah" over the sophomore.

Besides, it was not at all sure that Edith was going to Arizona. Her presence upon this train did not prove that her journey West had any connection with the letter Edith had received from Yucca.

"Why so serious, honey?" asked Helen a little later, pinching her chum's arm.

"This is a serious world, my dear," quoth Ruth, "and we are growing older every minute."

"What novel ideas you do have," gibed her chum, big-eyed. But she shook her a little, too. "There you go, Ruthie Fielding! Always having some secret from your owniest own chum."

"How do you know I have a secret?" smiled Ruth.

"Because of the two little lines that grow deeper in your forehead when you are puzzled or troubled," Helen told her, rather wickedly. "Sure sign you'll be married twice, honey."

"Don't suggest such horrid possibilities," gasped the girl of the Red Mill in mock horror. "Married twice, indeed! And I thought we had both given up all intention of being wedded even the *first* time?"

This chaff was all right to throw in Helen's eyes; but all the time Ruth expected one of the party to discover the presence of Edith Phelps on the train. She felt that with such discovery there would come an explosion of some kind; and she shrank from having any trouble with the sophomore.

Of course, with Miss Cullam present, Edith was not likely to display her spleen quite so openly as she sometimes did when alone with the other Ardmore girls. But Ruth knew Helen would be so curious to know what Edith's presence meant that "the fat would all be in the fire."

It was really amazing that Edith was not discovered before they reached Chicago. After that her reservation was in another car. Then on the fifth night of their journey came something that quite put the sophomore out of Ruth Field-

ing's mind, and out of Tom Cameron's as well.

They had changed trains and were on the trans-continental line when the startling incident happened. The porter had already begun arranging the berths when the train suddenly came to a jarring stop.

"What *is* the matter?" asked Miss Cullam of the porter. She already had her hair in "curlers" and was longing for bed.

"I done s'pect we broke in two, Ma'am," said the darkey, rolling his eyes. "Das' jes' wot it seems to me," and he darted out of the car.

There was a long wait; then some confusion arose outside the train. Tom came in from the rear. "Here's a pretty kettle of fish," he said.

"What is it, Tommy?" demanded his sister.

"The train broke in two and the front end got over a bridge here, and, being on a down grade, the engineer could not bring his engine to a stop at once. And now the bridge is afire. Come on out, girls. You might as well see the show."

CHAPTER VI

SOMEBODY AHEAD OF THEM

Even Miss Cullam—in her dressing gown—trailed out of the car after Tom. The sky was alight from the blazing bridge. It was a wooden structure, and burned like a pine knot.

Beyond the rolling cloud of smoke they could see dimly the lamps of the forward half of the train. The coupling having broken between two Pullmans, the engine had attached to it only the baggage and mail coaches, the dining car and one sleeping car.

The other Pullmans and the observation coach were stalled on the east side of the river.

"And no more chance of getting over to-night than there is of flying," a brakeman confided to Tom and the girls. "That bridge will be a charred wreck before midnight."

"Oh, goodness me! What *shall* we do?" was the cry. "Can't we get over in boats?"

"Where will you get the boats?" sniffed Miss Cullam.

"And the water's low in the river at this season," said the brakeman. "Couldn't use anything but a skiff."

"What then?" Tom asked, feeling responsibility roweling him. "We're not destined to remain here till they rebuild the bridge, I hope?"

"The conductor is wiring back for another engine. We'll pull back to Janesburg and from there take the cross-over line and go on by the Northern Route. It will put us back fully twelve hours, I reckon."

"Good-*night!*" exploded Tom.

"Why, what does it matter?" asked Helen, wonderingly. "We have all the time there is, haven't we?"

"Presumably," Miss Cullam said drily.

"But I telegraphed ahead to Yucca for rooms at the hotel," Tom explained, slowly, "and sent a long message to that guide Mr. Hammond told you about, Ruth."

"Oh!" cried Helen, giggling. "Flapjack Peters—such a romantic name. Mr. Hammond wrote Ruth that he was a 'character.'"

"'H. J. Peters,'" Tom read, from his memorandum. "Yes. I told him just when we would arrive and told him that after one night's sleep at the hotel we'd want to be on our way. But if we don't get there——"

"Oh, Tom, there's Ann, too!" Ruth exclaimed.

"She will be at Yucca too early if we are delayed so."

"I'll send some more telegrams when we get to Janesburg," Tom promised Ruth and his sister. "One to Ann Hicks, too."

"Those people in the forward Pullman will get through on time," Jennie Stone said. "I'm always losing something. 'Twas ever thus, since childhood's hour, my fondest hopes I've seen decay,' and so forth!"

Tom whispered to Ruth: "That sophomore from Ardmore will get ahead of us. She's in the forward Pullman."

"Oh, Edith!" murmured Ruth. "She was in that car, wasn't she?"

They were all in bed, as were the other tourists in the delayed Pullmans, before the extra locomotive the conductor had sent for arrived. It was coupled to the stalled half of the train and started back for Janesburg without one of the party bound for Yucca being the wiser.

Tom Cameron meant to send the supplementary telegrams from that junction as he had said. Indeed, he had written out several—one to his father to relieve any anxiety in the merchant's mind should he hear of the accident to their train; one to the guide, Peters; one to Ann Hicks to supplement the one already awaiting her at Yucca; and a fourth to the hotel.

But as he wished to put these messages on the wire himself, Tim did not entrust them to the negro porter. Instead he lay down in his berth with only his shoes removed—and he awoke in the morning with the sun flooding the opposite side of the car where the porter had already folded up the berths!

"Good gracious, Agnes!" gasped Tom, appearing in the corridor with his shoes in his hand. "What time is it? Eight-thirty? Is my watch right?"

"Ah reckon so, boss," grinned the porter. "'Most ev'rybody's up an' dressin'."

"And I wanted to send those telegrams from Janesburg."

"Oh Lawsy-massy! Janesburg's a good ways behint us, boss," said the porter. "Ef yo' wants to send 'em pertic'lar from dere, yo'll have to wait till our trip East, Ah reckon."

Tom did not feel much like laughing. In fact, he felt a good deal of annoyance. He made some further enquiries and discovered that it would be an hour yet before the train would linger long enough at any station for him to file telegrams.

They spent one more night "sleeping on shelves," as Jennie Stone expressed it, than they had counted upon. Miss Cullam went to her berth with a groan.

"Believe me, my dears," she announced, "I

shall welcome even a saddle as a relief from these cars. You are all nice girls, if I do say it, who perhaps shouldn't. I flatter myself I have had something to do with molding your more or less plastic minds and dispositions. But I must love you a great deal to ever attempt another such long journey as this for you or with you."

"Oh, Miss Cullam!" cried Trix Davenport, "we will erect a statue to you on Bliss Island—right near the Stone Face. And on it shall be engraved: 'Nor granite is more enduring than Miss Cullam.'"

"I wonder," murmured the teacher, "if that is complimentary or otherwise?"

But they all loved her. Miss Cullam developed very human qualities indeed, take her away from mathematics!

The party was held up for two hours at Kingman, waiting for a local train to steam on with them to their destination. And there Tom learned something which rather troubled him.

Telegrams were never received direct at Yucca. The railroad business was done by telephone, and all the messages sent to Yucca were telephoned through to the station agent—if that individual chanced to be on hand. Otherwise they were entrusted to the rural mail carrier. One could almost count the inhabitants of Yucca on one's fingers and toes!

"Jiminy!" gasped Tom, when he learned these particulars. "I bet I've made a mess of it."

He tried to find out at the Kingman station what had become of the final messages he had sent. The operator on duty when they arrived was now off duty, and he lived out of town.

"If they were mailed, son," observed the man then at the telegraph table, "you will get to Yucca about two hours before the mail gets there. Here comes your train now."

Had the girls not been so gaily engaged in chattering, they must have noticed Tom's solemn face. He was disturbed, for he felt that the comfort of the party, as well as the arrangements for the trip into the hills, was his own particular responsibility.

It was late afternoon when the combination local (half baggage and freight, and half passenger) hobbled to a stop at Yucca. Besides a dusty looking individual in a cap who served the railroad as station agent, there was not a human being in sight.

"What a jolly place!" cried Jennie Stone, turning to all points of the compass to gaze. "So much life! We're going to have a gay time in Yucca, I can see."

"Sh!" begged Trix. "Don't wake them up."

"Awaken whom, my dear?" drawled Sally Blanchard.

"The dead, I think," said Helen. "This place must be the understudy for a graveyard."

At that moment a gray muzzle was thrust between the rails of a corral beside the track and an awful screech rent the air, drowning the sound of the locomotive whistle as the train rolled away.

"For goodness' sake! what is that?" begged Rebecca, quite startled.

"Mountain canary," laughed Helen. "That is what will arouse you at dawn—and other times —while we are on the march to Freezeout."

"You don't mean to say," demanded Trix, "that all that sound came out of that little creature?" And she ran over to the corral fence the better to see the burro.

"And he didn't need any help," drawled Jennie. "Oh! you'll get used to little things like that."

"Never to that little thing," said Miss Cullam, tartly. "Can't he be muzzled?"

Meanwhile Tom had seized upon the station agent. He was a long, lean, "drawly" man, with seemingly a very languid interest in life.

"What telegrams?" he drawled.

Tom explained more fully and the man referred to a memorandum book he carried in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt.

"Yep. Three messages received over the 'phone from Kingman station. All delivered."

"Good!" Tom exclaimed, with vast relief.

"Four days ago," added the station agent.

That was a dash of cold water. "Didn't you receive other telegrams in the same way yesterday?"

"Not a one."

"Where have they gone, then?"

"I wouldn't be here 'twixt eight and 'leven. They'd come over the wire to Kingman, and the op'rator there would mail 'em. Mail man's due any time now."

"Well," groaned Tom, "let's go up to the hotel and see if they've reserved the rooms for us, if we are late."

"And where's Jane Ann Hicks?" queried Ruth, in some puzzlement. "*She* ought to be here to greet us."

"What about that guide—the Flapjack person?" added Helen. "Didn't you telegraph him, Tommy?"

"Who d'you mean—Flapjack Peters?" asked the station agent, interested. "Why, he lit out for some place in the Hualapai this forenoon, beauin' a party of these here tourists—or, so I heard tell."

There were blank faces among the newly arrived visitors from the East. But only Tom Cameron really felt disturbed. It looked to him as though somebody had got ahead of them!

CHAPTER VII

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR

"You needn't be 'fraid of not findin' room at Lon Crujes' hotel," drawled the station agent. "He don't often have more'n two visitors at a time there, and them's mostly travelin' salesmen. Only when somebody's shippin' cattle. And there ain't no cattlemen here now."

"Well, that is some relief, at least," Helen said promptly. "Come on, Tommy! Lead the procession. Take Miss Cullam's bag, too. The rest of us will carry our own."

"How can we get the trunks up to the hotel?" asked Ruth, beginning to realize that Tom, to whom she had left all the arrangements, was in a "pickle."

"Let's see what the hotel looks like first," returned Helen's twin, setting off along the dusty street.

A dog barked at the procession; but otherwise the inhabitants of Yucca showed a disposition to remain incurious. It was not necessary to ask

the way to Lon Crujes' hotel; it was the only building in town large enough to be dignified by the name of "Yucca House."

A Mexican woman in a one-piece garment gathered about her waist by a man's belt from which an empty gun-sheath dangled, met the party on the porch of the house. She seemed surprised to see them.

"You ain't them folks that telegraphed Lon you was comin', are you?" she asked. "Don't that beat all!"

"I telegraphed ahead for rooms—yes," Tom said.

"Well, the rooms is here all right—by goodness, yes!" she said, still staring. Such an array of feminine finery as the girls displayed had probably never dawned upon Mrs. Crujes' vision before. "Nobody ain't run off with the rooms. We ain't never crowded none in this hotel, 'cept in beef shippin' time."

"Well, how about meals?" Tom asked quietly.

"If Lon gets home with a side of beef he went for, we'll be all right," the woman said. "You kin all come in, I reckon. But say! who was them gals here yesterday, then, if 'twasn't you."

"What girls?" asked Ruth, who remained with Tom to inquire.

"Have they gone away again?" demanded Tom.

"By goodness, yes! Two gals. One was tenterfoot all right; but 'tother knowed her way 'round, I sh'd say."

"Ann?" queried Ruth of Tom.

"Must have been. But the other—Say, Mrs. Crujes, tell us about them, will you, please?" he asked the Mexican woman.

"Why, this tenderfoot gal dropped off the transcontinental. Jest the train we expected you folks on. I s'pose you was the folks we expected?"

"That's right. We're the ones," said Tom, hastily. "Go on."

"The other lady, *she* come later. She's Western all right."

"Ann is from Montana," Ruth said, deeply interested.

"So she said. I reckoned she never met up with the Eastern gal before, did she?"

"But who *is* the girl you speak of—the one from the East?" gasped Ruth.

"Huh! Don't you know her neither?"

"I'm not sure I couldn't guess," Ruth declared. Tom kept his lips tightly closed.

"They made friends, then," explained the woman. "The gal you say you know, and the tenderfoot. And they went off together this morning with Flapjack——"

"Not with our guide?" cried Ruth. "Oh, Tom! what can it mean?"

"Got me," grunted the young fellow.

"Why! it is the most mysterious affair," Ruth repeated. "I can't understand it."

"Leave it to me," said Tom, quickly. "You go in with the other girls and primp."

"Primp, indeed!"

"I suppose you'll have to here, just the same as anywhere else," the boy said, with a quick grin. "I'll look around and see what's happened. Of course, that Flapjack person can't have gone far."

"And Ann wouldn't have run away from us, I'm sure," Ruth sent back over her shoulder as she entered the hotel.

Before the Mexican woman could waddle after Ruth, Tom hailed her again. "Say!" he asked, "where can I find this Peters chap?"

"The Señor Flapjack?"

"Yes. Fine name, that," he added in an undertone.

"He it is who is famous at making the American flapjack—*si si!*" said the woman. "But he is gone I tell you. I know not where. Maybe Lon, he can tell you when he come back with the beef—by goodness, yes!"

"But he lives here in town, doesn't he? Hasn't he a family?"

"Oh, sure! He's got Min."

"Who's Min? A Chinaman?"

"Chink? Can you beat it?" ejaculated the

woman, grinning broadly. "Min's his daughter. See that house down there with the front painted yellow?"

"Yes," admitted Tom, rather abashed.

"That's where Flapjack, he live. Sure! And Min can tell you where he's gone and how long he'll be away."

The hotel proprietor's wife disappeared, bustling away to attend to the wants of this party of guests that was apt to swamp her entire menage. Tom hesitated about searching out the guide's daughter alone. "Min" promised embarrassing possibilities to his mind.

"Jiminy! we're up against it, I believe," he thought. "They'll all blame me, I suppose. I ought not to have gone to sleep night before last and missed sending those last telegrams from Janesburg.

"Father will say I wasn't 'tending to business properly. I wonder what I'd better do."

Ruth suddenly reappeared. She had merely gone inside to get rid of her bag and assure Miss Cullam that there were some matters she and Tom had to attend to. Now she approached her chum's brother with a question that excited and startled him.

"What under the sun could have made her act so, do you suppose, Tom?"

"Huh? Who?" he gasped.

"That girl. She's gone off with our guide and all."

"Who do you mean? Jane Ann Hicks?"

"Goodness! I don't understand Ann's part in it, either. But she's not the leading spirit, it is evident."

"Who do you mean, then?" Tom demanded.

"Edith Phelps. Of course it is she. She arrived here on the trans-continental train on time. Tommy, she was in correspondence with somebody here in Yucca. Helen and I saw the envelope. And it puzzled us. Her being on the train puzzled me more. And now——"

"Oh, Jiminy!" ejaculated Tom Cameron. "The mystery deepens. Rival picture company, maybe, Ruth. How about it?"

"I don't think it's *that,*" said Ruth Fielding, reflectively. "I am sure Edie Phelps has no connection with movie people—no, indeed!"

CHAPTER VIII

MIN

"WELL, let's go along and see Flapjack's daughter," Tom proposed. "I don't want to make the acquaintance of any strange girl without somebody to defend me," and he grinned at the girl of the Red Mill.

"Oh, yes. We know just how desperately timid you are, Tommy-boy," she told him, smiling. "I will be your shield and buckler. Lead on."

The house had a yellow front, but was elsewhere left bare of paint. It stood away from its neighbors and, as Ruth and Tom Cameron approached it, it seemed deserted. From other houses they were frankly watched by slatternly women and several idle men.

Tom rapped gently at the front door. There was no reply and after repeating the summons several times Ruth suggested that they try a rear entrance.

"Huh!" complained the boy. "This Min they tell of must be deaf."

"Or bashful. Perhaps she is nothing but a child and is afraid of us."

Tom merely grunted in reply, and led the way into a weed-grown yard. The fence was of wire and laths—the kind bought by the roll ready to set up; but it was very much dilapidated. The fence had never been finished at the rear and up on a scrubby side hill behind the house a man was wielding an axe.

"Maybe he knows something about this Flapjack Peters person," grumbled Tom.

"Knock on the back door," ordered Ruth Fielding briskly. "If that guide has a daughter she must know where he's gone, and for how long. It's the most mysterious thing!"

"It gets me," admitted Tom, knocking again.

"Mr. Hamomnd said that he knew this guide and that he believed he was a fairly trustworthy person. He is what they call an 'old-timer'—been living here or hereabout for years and years. Just the person to find Freezeout Camp."

"Well, there must be other men who know their way about the hills," and Tom turned his back to the door to look straight away across the valley toward the faint, blue eminences that marked the Hualapai Range.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" sighed Ruth, likewise looking at the mountains. "How clear the air is! See that peak away to the north? We saw it from

the car window. That is the tallest mountain in the range—Hualapai Peak. Oh, Tom!"

"Yes?" he asked.

"That man looks awfully funny to me. Do you see——?"

Tom wheeled to look at the person chopping wood a few rods away. The woodchopper wore an old felt hat; from underenath its brim flowed several straggly locks of black hair.

"Must be an Indian," muttered Tom.

"It must be a woman!" exclaimed Ruth. "It *is* a woman, Tom! I'm going to ask her——"

"What?" demanded the youth; but he trailed along behind the self-reliant girl of the Red Mill.

The woodchopper did not even raise her head as the two young folks approached. She beat upon the log she was splitting with the old axe and showed not the least interest in their presence.

Ruth led the way around in front of her and demanded:

"Do you know where Mr. Peters' daughter is? We had business with him, and they tell us he is away from home."

At that the woman in men's shabby habiliments raised her head and looked at them.

"Jiminy!" exploded Tom, but under his breath. "It *is* a girl!"

Ruth was quite as curious as her companion;

but she was wise enough to reveal nothing in her own countenance but polite interest.

The masquerader was both young and pretty; only the perspiration had poured down her face and left it grimy. Her hands were red and rough —calloused as a laboring man's and with blunted fingers and broken nails.

When she stood up straight, however, even the overalls and jumper she wore, and the broken old hat upon her head, could not hide the fact that she was of a graceful figure.

"I beg your pardon," said Ruth again. "Can you tell me where Miss Peters is?"

"I can tell you where *Min* Peters is, if you want to know so bad," drawled the girl, red suffusing her bronzed cheeks and a little flash coming into her big gray eyes.

"That—that must be the person we wish to see."

"Then see her," snapped the other ungraciously. "An' I s'pose you fancy folks think her a sight, sure 'nuff."

"You mean *you* are Mr. Peters' daughter?" Ruth asked, doubtfully.

"I'm Flapjack's girl," the other said, biting her remarks off short.

"Oh!" cried Ruth. "Then you can tell us all about it."

"All about what?"

"How it happens that your father is not here at Yucca to meet us?"

"Huh! What would he want to meet you for?" asked the girl, shaking back her straggly hair.

"Why, it was arranged by Mr. Hammond that Mr. Peters should guide us into the Range. We are going to Freezeout Camp."

"Wha-at?" drawled Min Peters in evident surprise. "You, too?"

Tom here put in a word. "I am the one who telegraphed to Mr. Peters when we were on the way here. It was understood through Mr. Hammond that Mr. Peters was to hold himself in readiness for our party."

"Then what about them other girls?" demanded the girl, with sudden vigor. "They done fooled pop, did they?"

"I don't understand what you mean by 'those other girls,' " Ruth hastened to say.

"Why, pop's already started for the hills. I I dunno whether he's goin' to Freezeout or not. There ain't nobody at that old camp, nohow. Dunno what you want to go there for."

Ruth waived that matter to say, eagerly:

"How many girls are there in this party your father has gone off with?"

"Two. He 'spected more I reckon, for there's a bunch of ponies down in Jeb's corral. But the girl that bossed the thing said you-all had backed

out. It looked right funny to *me*—two girls goin' off there into the hills. And she was a tenderfoot all right."

"You mean the girl who 'bossed' the affair?" asked Tom, curiously.

"Yep. The other girl seemed jest driftin' along with her. *She* knowed how to ride, and she brought her own saddle and rope with her. But that there tenderfoot started off sidesaddle, like a missioner."

"A 'missioner?' " repeated Ruth, curiously.

"These here women that sometimes come here teachin' an' preachin'. They most all of 'em ride sidesaddle. Many of 'em on a burro at that. 'Cause a burro don't never git out of a walk if he kin help it. But I've purty near broke my neck teachin' four or five of the ponies to stand for a sidesaddle—poor critters. I rid 'em with a blanket wrapped 'round me to git 'em used to a skirt flappin'," and she spoke in some amusement.

"Well," Ruth said, more briskly, "I don't exactly understand those girls going without us. One of them I am sure is our friend. The girl who evidently engaged your father is not a stranger to us; but she was not of our party."

"What in tarnation takes you 'way into them mountains to Freezeout?" demanded Min Peters. "There ain't a sign of color left there, so pop says; and he's prospected all through the range

on that far side. Why, he remembers Freezout when it was a real camp. And I kin tell you there ain't much left of it now."

"Oh!" cried Ruth. "Have you seen it?"

"Sure. I been all through the Range with pop. He didn't have nobody to leave me with when I was little. I ain't never had no chance like other girls," said Min, in no very pleasant tone. "Why I ain't scurcely human, I reckon!"

At that Ruth laughed frankly at her. "What nonsense!" she cried. "You are just as human and just as much of a girl as any of us. As I am. Your clothes don't even hide the fact that you are a girl. But I suppose you wear them because you can work easier in men's garments?"

"And that's where you s'pose mighty wrong," snapped Min.

"No?"

"I wear these old duds 'cause I ain't got no others to wear. That's why."

She said it in an angry tone, and the red flowed into her cheeks again and her gray eyes flashed.

"I never *did* have nothin' like other girls. Pop bought me overalls to wear when I was jest a kid; and that's about all he ever did buy me. He thinks they air good enough. I haf to work like a boy; so why not dress like a boy? Huh?"

Tom had moved away. Somehow he felt a delicacy about listening to this frank avowal of

the strange girl's trials. But Ruth was sympathetic and she seized Min's unwilling hand.

"Oh, my dear!" she cried under her breath. "I am sorry. Can't you work and earn money to clothe yourself properly?"

"What'll I do? The cattlemen won't hire me, though I kin rope and hog-tie as well as any puncher they got. But they say a girl would make trouble for 'em. Nobody around here ever has money enough to hire a girl to do anything. I don't know nothing about cookin' or housework —'cept to make flapjacks. I kin do camp cookin' as good as pop; only I don't use two griddles at a time same's he does. But huntin' parties won't hire me. It sure is tough luck bein' a girl."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Ruth again. "I don't believe that. There must be some way of improving your condition."

"You show me how to earn some money, then," cried Min. "I'll dress as fancy as any of you. Oh! I was watchin' you girls troop up from the train. And that other girl that went off with pop this mornin'. *She* gimme a look, now I tell you. I'd like to beat her up, I would!"

Ruth passed over this remark in silence. She was thinking. "Wait a moment, Min," she begged, "I must speak to Mr. Cameron," and she led Tom aside.

"Now, Tommy, we've just got to get to Freeze-

out Camp some way. We don't want to wait here a week or more for the movie company to arrive. Mr. Hammond expects me to have the first part of the scenario ready for the director when he gets on the ground. And I *must* see the old camp just as it is."

"I'd like to know what that Edith Phelps has got to do with it—and why Ann Hicks went off with her," growled Tom.

"Oh, dear! Don't you suppose I am just as curious as you are?" Ruth demanded. "But *that* doesn't get us anywhere."

"Well, what will get us to Freezeout?" he asked.

"Getting started, first of all," laughed Ruth. "And we can do it. This girl can guide us just as well as her father could. We can get a man or a boy to look after the ponies and the pack-train. A 'wrangler' don't they call them on the ranch?"

"The girl looks capable enough," admitted Tom. "But what will your Miss Cullam say to her?"

Ruth giggled. "Poor Miss Cullam is doomed to get several shocks, I am afraid, before the trip is over."

"All right. You're the doctor," Tom said, grinning. "Looks to me like some lark. This Min Peters is certainly a caution!"

CHAPTER IX

IN THE SADDLE AT LAST

"THE matter can be arranged in one, two, three order!" Ruth cried.

She had already seen just the way to go about it. Give Min Peters the chance to make money and she would jump at it.

"You see, *we* don't mind having a girl for cook and guide. We will rather like it," she said, laughing into Min's delighted face. "Poor old Tom is our only male companion. And unless we find a man to take care of the horses and burros he'll have to put on overalls himself and do that work."

"That'll be all right. I can get a Mexican boy —a good one," Min said quickly. "The hosses is all in Jeb's corral and you can hire of him. I tell you pop expected a big crowd of you and he was disappointed."

"You will make the money he would have made," Ruth told her cheerfully. "We will pay you man's wages and we shall want you at least

a month. Eighty dollars and 'found.' How is that?"

"Looks like heaven," said Min bluntly. "I ain't never seen so much money in my life!"

"And the Mexican boy?"

"Pedro Morales. Twenty-two fifty is all he'll expect. We don't pay Greasers like we do white men in this country," said the girl with some bruskness. "But, say, Miss——"

"I am Ruth Fielding."

"Miss Fielding, then. You're the boss of this outfit?"

"I suppose so. I shall pay the bills at any rate. Until Mr. Hammond and the moving picture people arrive."

"Well! what will them other girls say to me —dressed this here way?"

"If you had plenty of dresses and were starting into the range for a trip like this, you'd put on these same clothes, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, sure."

"All right then. You're hired to do a man's work, so I presume a man's clothing will the better become you while you are so engaged," said Ruth, smiling at her frankly.

"All right. Though they've got some calico dresses at the store. I could buy one and wear it—that is, if you'd advance me that much money. But I got a catalog from a Chicago store——

"No use talking," he thought. "I've got to take somebody into my confidence about this girl. To keep such a mystery to myself is likely to affect my brain. Humph! I'll tell Ruth. She can keep a secret—if she wants to," and he went off whistling to the men's lavatory at the other end of the car.

Later he found Ruth on the observation platform. They were alone there for some time and Tom took her into his confidence.

"Don't tell Helen, now," he urged. "She'll only rig me. And I'm bound to have a bad enough time with all you girls, as it is."

"Poor boy," Ruth said, commiseratingly. "You *are* in for a bad time, aren't you? What about this strange and mysterious female in Lower Five?"

But as he related the details of the mystery, about the chauffeur and all, Ruth grew rather grave.

"As we go through to the dining car for breakfast let us see if we can establish her identity," she told him. "Never mind saying anything to the other girls about it. Just point her out to me."

"Say! I'm not likely to spread the matter broadcast," retorted Tom. "Only I *am* curious."

So was Ruth. But she bided her time and sharply scrutinized every female figure she saw

in the cars as they trooped through to breakfast. She waited for Tom to point out this "mysterious lady;" but the girl of Lower Five did not appear.

The train was rushing across the prairies in mid-forenoon when Tom came suddenly to Ruth and gave her a look that she knew meant "Follow me." When she got up Jennie drawled:

"Now, see here, Ruthie! What's going on between that perfectly splendid brother of Cameron's and you? Are you trying to make the rest of us girls jealous?"

"Perhaps," Ruth replied, smiling, then hurried with her chum's brother into the next car.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ruth suddenly, and she stopped by the door.

"Know her?" asked Tom, with curiosity.

Ruth nodded and hastily turned away so that the girl might not see that she was observed.

"Well, now!" cried Tom. "Tip me off. Explain—elucidate—make clear. I'm as puzzled as I can be."

"So am I, Tommy," Ruth told him. "I haven't the least idea *why* that girl should be interested in our affairs. And I'm not sure that she *is*."

"Who is she?" he demanded.

"She goes to college with us. Not in our class, you understand. I am sure none of our party had an idea Edie Phelps was going West this vacation."

Gee! it's full of the purtiest dresses. I *dreamed* about gettin' hold of some money some time and buyin' one o' them—everything to go with it. But to tell you honest, when pop gits any loose change, he spends it for red liquor."

"I'll see that you have the money you are going to earn, for yourself," Ruth assured her. "Now tell Mr. Cameron just what to buy. He will do the purchasing at the store. And introduce him to the Mexican boy, Pedro, too. I'll run to tell the other girls how lucky we are to get you to help us, Min."

She hurried away, in reality to prepare her friends for the appearance of the girl who had never worn proper feminine habiliments. She knew that Min would not put up with any giggling on the part of the "tenderfoot" girls. As for Miss Cullam, that good woman said:

"I'm sure I can stand overalls on a girl as well as I can stand these divided skirts and bloomers that some of you are going to wear."

"Just think of a girl never having worn a pretty frock!" gasped Helen. "Isn't that outrageous!"

"The poor thing," said Rebecca. "But she must be awfully coarse and rough."

"Don't let her see that you think so, Rebecca," commanded Ruth quickly. "She has keener perceptions than the average, believe me! We must not hurt her feelings."

"Trust *you* not to hurt anybody's feelings, Ruthie," drawled Jennie Stone. "But I might find a dress in my trunk that will fit her."

"Oh, girls! let's dress her up—let's give her enough of our own finery out of the trunks to make her feel like a real girl." This from Helen.

"Not now," Ruth said quickly. "She would not thank you. She is an independent thing—you'll see. Let her earn her new clothes—and get acquainted with us."

"Ruth possesses the 'wisdom of serpents,'" Miss Cullam said, smiling. "Are the trunks going to remain here all the time we are absent in the hills?"

"Mr. Hammond is going to have several wagons to transport his goods to Freezeout; and if there is room he will bring along our trunks too. By that time we shall probably be glad to get into something besides our riding habits."

Miss Cullam sighed. "I can see that this roughing it is going to be a much more serious matter than I thought."

However, they all looked eagerly forward to the start into the hills. The hotelkeeper returned with his horse-load of beef, and he was able to give Ruth and Miss Cullam certain information regarding the two girls who had departed with Flapjack Peters on the trail to Freezeout.

"What can Edith Phelps mean by such ac-

tions?" the Ardmore teacher demanded in private of Ruth. "You should have told me about that letter and Edith's presence on the train. I should have gone to her and asked her what it meant."

"Perhaps that would have been well," Ruth admitted. "But, dear Miss Cullam! how was I to know that Edith was coming here to Yucca?"

"Yes. I presume that the blame can be attached to nobody in particular. But how could Edith Phelps have gained the confidence of your friend, Miss Hicks?"

"That certainly puzzles me. Edith made all the arrangements with Min's father, so Min says. Ann Hicks must have been misled in some way."

"It looks very strange to me," observed Miss Cullam. "I have my suspicions of Edith Phelps, and always have had. There! you see that we instructors at college cannot help being biased in our opinions of the girls."

"Dear me, Miss Cullam!" laughed Ruth. "Isn't that merely human nature? It is not alone the nature of members of the college faculty."

The hotel was a very plainly furnished place; but the girls and Miss Cullam managed to spend the night comfortably. At eight o'clock in the morning Tom and a half grown Mexican boy were at the hotel door with a cavalcade of ten ponies and four burros.

Tom had learned the diamond hitch while he

was at Silver Ranch and he helped fasten the necessary baggage upon the four little gray beasts. Each rider was obliged to pack a blanket-roll and certain personal articles. But the bulk of the provisions, and a small shelter tent for Miss Cullam, were distributed among the pack animals.

The Briarwood girls and Trix Davenport rode in men's saddles; as did Min Peters; but Sally Blanchard and Rebecca and Miss Cullam had insisted upon sidesaddles.

"And the mildest mannered pony in the lot, please," the teacher said to Tom. "I am just as afraid of the little beasts as I can be. Ugh!"

"And they are so cunning!" drawled Jennie. She stepped quickly aside to escape the teeth of her own mount, who apparently considered the possibility of eating her so as not to bear her weight.

"And can you blame him?" demanded Helen. "It would look better if you shouldered the pony instead of riding on his back."

"Is that so? Just for that I'll bear down as heavily as I can on him," declared Jennie. "I'm not going to let any little cowpony nibble at me!"

The party started away from Yucca with Min Peters ahead and Pedro bringing up the rear with his burros. Although the ponies could travel at a much faster pace than the pack animals, the latter at their steady pace would overtake the cavalcade of riders before the day was done.

The road they struck into after leaving town was a pretty good wagon trail and the riding was easy. There was an occasional ranch-house at which the occupants showed considerable interest in the tourists. But before noon they had ridden into the foothills and Min told them that thereafter dwellings would be few and far between.

"'Ceptin' where there's a town. There are some regular gold washin's we pass. Hydraulic minin', you know. But they are all on this side of the Range. Nothin' doin' on t'other side. All the pay streaks petered out years an' years ago. Even a Chink couldn't make a day's wages at them old diggin's like Freezeout."

"Well, we are not gold hunting," laughed Ruth. "We are going to mine for a better output—moving pictures."

"I've heard tell of them," said Min, curiously. "There was a feller worked for the Lazy C that went to California and worked for them picture fellers. He got three dollars a day and his pony's keep an' says he never worked so hard in his life. That is, when the sun shone; and it most never does rain in that part o' California, he says."

The prospect of camping out of doors, even in this warm and beautiful weather, was what most troubled Miss Cullam and some of the girls.

"With the sky for a canopy!" sighed Sally Blanchard. "Suppose there are wolves?"

"There are coyotes," Helen explained. "But they only howl at you."

"That's enough I should hope," Rebecca Frayne said. "Can't we keep on to the next house and hire beds?"

This was along toward supper time and the burros were in sight and the sun was going down.

"The nearest ranch is Littell's," explained Min Peters. "And it's most thirty mile ahead. We couldn't make it."

"Of course it will be *fun* to camp out, Rebecca," declared Ruth cheerfully. "Wait and see."

"I'm likely to know more about it by morning," admitted Rebecca. "I only hope the experience will not be too awful."

Ruth and her chum, as well as Jennie and Tom, laughed at the girl. They expected nothing unusual to happen. However——

CHAPTER X

THE STAMPEDE

THEIR guide was fully as capable as a man, and proved it when it came to making camp. Her selection of the camping site could not have been bettered; she wielded an axe as well as a man in cutting brush for bedding and wood for the fires.

As soon as Pedro and the burros arrived, Min proceeded to get supper for the party with a skill and celerity that reminded him, so Tom said, of one of those jugglers in vaudeville that keep half a dozen articles in the air at a time.

Min broiled bacon, made coffee, mixed and baked biscuits on a board before the coals, and finally made the popular flapjacks in unending number—and attended to all these things without assistance.

"Pop can beat me at flapjacks. Them's his long suit," declared the girl guide. "Wait till you see him toss 'em—a pan in each hand."

Min's viands could only be praised, and the party made a hearty supper.

As dusk mantled them about, Tom suddenly saw a spark of light out across the plain to the south.

"What's yonder?" he asked. "I thought you said there was no house near here, Miss Peters?"

"Gee! if you don't stop calling me *that,*" gasped their guide, "I certainly will go crazy. I ain't used to it. But that ain't a house."

"What is it, then?" asked the abashed Tom.

"One of the Lazy C outfits I reckon. Didn't you see the cattle grazin' yonder when we come over that last ridge?"

"Oh, my! a regular herd of cattle such as you read about?" demanded Sally Blanchard. "And real cowboys with them?"

"I s'pect they think they're real enough," replied Min, dryly. "Punchin' steers ain't no cinch, lemme tell you."

"Doesn't she talk queerly?" said Rebecca, in a whisper. "She really doesn't seem to be a very proper person."

"My goodness!" gasped Jennie Stone, choked with laughter at this. "What do you expect of a girl who's lived in the mines all her life? Polite, Back-Bay English and all the refinements of the Hub?"

"No-o," admitted Rebecca. "But, after all, refined people are ever so much nicer than rude people. Don't you find it so yourself, Jennie?"

"Well, I s'pose that's so," admitted the plump girl. "For a steady diet. Just the same, if you judged it by its husk, you'd never know how sweet the meat of a chestnut is."

The campfire at the chuckwagon of the herding outfit was several miles away; and later in the evening it died down and the glow of it disappeared.

The girls were tired enough to seek repose early. Min, Tom and the Mexican boy had agreed to divide the night into three watches. Otherwise Rebecca declared she would be afraid even to close her eyes—and then her regular breathing announced that sleep had overtaken her within sixty seconds of her lying down!

Min chose the first watch and Ruth was not sleepy. During the turns before midnight the girl from the East and the girl who had lived a boy's life in the mining country became very well acquainted indeed.

There had not been any "lucky strikes" in this region since Min could remember. But now and then new veins of gold were discovered on old claims; or other metals had been discovered where the early miners had looked only for gold.

"And pop's an old-timer," sighed Min. "He'll never be any good for anything but prospectin'. Once it gets into a man, I reckon there ain't no way of his ever gettin' away from it. Pop's

panned for gold in three States; he'll jest die a prospector and nothin' more."

"It's good of you to have stuck to him since you grew big," said Ruth.

"What else could I do?" demanded the Western girl. "Of course he loves me in his way; and when he goes on his sprees he'd die some time if I wasn't on hand to nurse him. But some day I'm goin' to get a bunch of money of my own—an' some clo'es—and I'm goin' to light out and leave him where he lies. Yes, ma'am!"

Ruth did not believe Min would do quite that; and to change the subject, she asked suddenly:

"What's that yonder? That glow over the hill?"

"Moon. It's going to be bright as day, too. Them boys of the Lazy C will ride close herd."

"Why?"

"Don't you know moonlight makes cattle right ornery? The shadows are so black, you know. Then, mebbe there's something 'bout moonlight that affects cows. It does folks, too. Makes 'em right crazy, I hear."

"I have heard of people being moonstruck," laughed Ruth. "But that was in the tropics."

"Howsomever," Min declared, "it makes the cows oneasy. See! there's the edge of her. Like silver, ain't it?"

The moon flooded the whole plain with its

beams as it rose from behind the mountains. One might have easily read coarse print by its light.

Every bush and shrub cast a black reflection upon the ground. It was very still—not a breath of air stirring. Far, far away rose the whine of a coyote; and the girls could hear one of the herdsmen singing as he urged his pony around and around the cattle.

"You hear 'em pipin' up?" said Min, smiling. "Them boys of the Lazy C know their business. Singin' keeps the cows quiet—sometimes."

Their own fire died out completely. There was no need for it. By and by Ruth roused Tom Cameron, for it was twelve o'clock. Then both she and Min crept into their own blanket-nests, already arranged. The other girls were sleeping as peacefully as though they were in their own beds at Ardmore College.

Tom was refreshed with sleep and had no intention of so much as "batting an eye." The brilliancy of the moonlight was sufficient to keep him awake.

Yet he got to thinking and it took something of a jarring nature to arouse him at last. He heard hoarse shouts and felt the earth tremble as many, many hoofs thundered over it!

Leaping up he looked around. Bright as the moon's rays were he did not at first descry the approaching danger. It could not be possible that

the cattle had stampeded and were coming up the valley, headed for the tourists' camp!

Yet that is what he finally made out. He shouted to Pedro, and finally kicked the boy awake. Without thinking of the danger to the girls Tom believed first of all that their ponies and burros might be swept away with the charging steers.

"Gather up those lariats and hold the ponies!" Tom shouted to the Mexican. "The burros won't go far away from the horses. Hi, Min Peters! What do you know about this?"

Their guide had come out of her blanket wide awake. She appreciated the peril much more keenly than did Tom or the girls.

"A fire! We want a fire!" she shouted. "Never mind them ponies, Pedro! You strike a light!"

Up the valley came charging the forefront of the cattle, their wicked, long horns threatening dire things. As the Eastern girls awoke and saw the cattle coming, they were for the most part paralyzed with fear.

"Fire! Start a fire!" yelled Min, again.

The thunder of the hoofs almost drowned her voice. But Ruth Fielding suddenly realized what the girl guide meant. The cattle would not charge over a fire or into the light of one.

She grabbed something from under her blanket and leaped away from Miss Cullam's tent toward the stampede. Tom shouted to her to come back;

Helen groaned aloud and seized the sleepy Jennie Stone.

"She'll be killed!" declared Helen.

"What's Ruth doing?" gasped the plump girl.

Then Ruth touched the trigger of the big tungsten lamp, and the spotlight shot the herd at about the middle of its advance wave. Snorting and plunging steers crowded away from the dazzling beam of light, brighter and more intense than the moon's rays, and so divided and passed on either side of the tourists' encampment

The odor of the beasts and the dust they kicked up almost suffocated the girls, but they were unharmed. Nor did the ponies and burros escape with the frightened herd.

The racing punchers passed on either side of the camp, shouting their congratulations to the campers. The latter, however, enjoyed little further sleep that night.

"Such excitement!" murmured Miss Cullam, wrapped in her blanket and sitting before the fire that Pedro had built up again. "And I thought you said, Ruth Fielding, that this trip would probably be no more strenuous than a picnic on Bliss Island?"

But Min eyed the girl of the Red Mill with something like admiration. "Huh!" she muttered, "some of these Eastern tenderfoots are some good in a pinch after all."

CHAPTER XI

AT HANDY GULCH

SITTING around a blanket spread for a table-cloth at sunrise and eating eggs and bacon with more flapjacks, the incidents of the night seemed less tangible, and certainly less perilous.

"Why, I can't imagine those mild-eyed cows making such a scramble by us as they did," Trix Davenport remarked.

" 'Mild-eyed kine' is good—very good indeed," said Jennie Stone. "These long-horns are about as mild-tempered as wolves. I can remember that we saw some of them in tempestuous mood up at Silver Ranch. Isn't that so, Helen?"

"Truly," admitted the black-eyed girl.

"I shall never care even to *eat* beef if we go through many such experiences as that stampede," Miss Cullam declared. "Let us hurry away from the vicinity of these maddened beasts."

"We'll be off the range to-day," said Min dryly. "Then there won't be nothing to scare you tenderfoots."

"No bears, or wolves, or panthers?" drawled Jennie wickedly.

"Oh, mercy! You don't mean there are such creatures in the hills?" cried Rebecca.

"I don't reckon we'll meet up with such," Min said.

"Shouldn't we have brought guns with us?" asked Sally timidly.

"Goodness! And shoot each other?" cried Miss Cullam.

"Why, you didn't say nothin' about huntin'," said the guide slowly. "Pop's got his rifle with him. But I'm packin' a forty-five; that'll scare off most anything on four laigs. And there ain't no two-legged critters to hurt us."

"I've an automatic," said Tom Cameron quietly. "Didn't know but I might have a chance to shoot a jackrabbit or the like."

"What for?" drawled Min, sarcastically. "We ain't likely to stay in one place long enough to cook such a critter. They're usually tougher'n all git-out, Mister."

"At any rate," said Ruth, with satisfaction, "the party is sufficiently armed. Let us not fear bears or mountain lions."

"Or jackrabbits," chuckled Jennie.

"And are you *sure* there are no ill-disposed men in the mountains?" asked the teacher.

"Men?" sniffed Min. "I ain't 'fraid of men,

I hope! There ain't nothin' wuss than a drunken man, and I've had experience enough with them."

Ruth knew she referred to her father; but she did not tell the other girls and Miss Cullam what Min had confided to her the previous evening.

The trail led them into the foothills that day and before night the rugged nature of the ground assured even Miss Cullam that there was little liklihood of such an unpleasant happening as had startled them the night before.

They halted to camp for the night beside a collection of small huts and tents that marked the presence of a placer digging which had been found the spring before and still showed "color."

There were nearly a dozen flannel-shirted and high-booted miners at this spot, and the sight of the girls from the East had a really startling effect upon these lonely men. There was not a woman at the camp.

The men knocked off work for the day the moment the tourists arrived. Every man of them, including the Mexican water-carrier, was broadly asmile. And they were all ready and willing to show "the ladies from the East" how placer mining was done.

The output of a mountain spring had been brought down an open plank sluice into the little glen where the vein of fine gold had been discovered; and with the current of this stream the gold-

bearing soil was "washed" in sluice-boxes.

The miners, rough but good-natured fellows, all made a "clean up" then and there, and each of the visitors was presented with a pinch of gold dust, right from the riffles.

This placer-mining camp was run on a community basis, and the camp cook insisted upon getting supper for all, and an abundant if not a delicately prepared meal was the result.

"I'm not sure that we should allow these men to go to so much expense and trouble," Miss Cullam whispered to Ruth and Min Peters.

"Oh, gee!" ejaculated the girl in boy's clothing. "Don't let it worry you for a minute, Miss Cullam. We're a godsend to them fellers. If they didn't spend their money once't in a while they'd git too wealthy," and she chuckled.

"That could not possibly be, when they work so long and hard for a pinch of gold dust," declared the college instructor.

"They fling it away just as though it come easy," returned Min. "Believe me! it's much better for 'em to have you folks here and blow you to their best, than it is for them to go down to Yucca and blow it all in on red liquor."

The miners would have gone further and given up their cabins or their tents to the use of the women. But even Rebecca had enjoyed sleeping out the night before and would not be tempted.

The air was so dry and tonic in its qualities that the walls of a house or even of a tent seemed superfluous.

"I do miss my morning plunge or shower," Helen admitted. "I feel as though all this red dust and grit had got into my skin and never would get out again. But one can't rough it and keep clean, too, I suppopse."

"That water in the sluice looks lovely," confessed Jennie Stone. "I'd dearly like to go paddling in it if there weren't so many men about."

"After all," said Ruth, "although we are traveling like men we don't act as they would. Tom slipped off by himself and behind that screen of bushes up there on the hillside he took a bath in the sluice. But there isn't a girl here who would do it."

"Oh, lawsy, I didn't bring my bathing suit," drawled Jennie. "That was an oversight."

"Old Tom does get a few things on us, doesn't he?" commented Helen. "Perhaps being a boy isn't, after all, an unmitigated evil."

"But the water's so co-o-ld!" shivered Trix. "I'm sure I wouldn't care for a plunge in this mountain stream. Will there be heated bathrooms at Freezeout Camp, Fielding?"

"Humph!" Miss Cullam ejaculated. "The title of the place sounds as though steam heat would be the fashion and tiled bathrooms plentiful!"

The third day of the journey was quite as fair as the previous days; but the way was still more rugged, so they did not travel so far. They camped that night in a deep gorge, and it was cold enough for the fires to feel grateful. Tom and the Mexican kept two fires well supplied with fuel all night. Once a coyote stood on a bank above their heads and sang his song of hunger and loneliness until, as Sally declared, she thought she should "fly off the handle."

"I never *did* hear such an unpleasant sound in all my life—it beats the grinding of an ungreased wagon wheel! I wish you would drive him away, Tom."

So Tom pulled out the automatic that he had been "aching" to use, and sent a couple of shots in the direction of the lank and hungry beast—who immediately crossed the gorge and serenaded them from the other bank!

"What's the use of killing a perfectly useless creature?" demanded Ruth.

"No fear," laughed Jennie. "Tom won't kill it. He's only shooting holes in the circumambient atmosphere."

There was a haze over the mountain tops at dawn on the fourth day; but Min assured the girls that it could not mean rain. "We ain't had no rain for so long that it's forgotten how," she said. "But mebbe there'll be a wind storm before night."

"Oh! as long as we're dry——"

"Yes, Miss Ruth," put in the girl guide. "We'll be *dry*, all right. But a wind storm here in Arizona ain't to be sneezed at. Sometimes it comes right cold, too."

"In summer?"

"Yep. It can git mighty cold in summer if it sets out to. But we'll try to make Handy Gulch early and git under cover if the sand begins to sift."

"Oh me! oh my!" groaned Jennie. "A sand storm? And like Helen I feel already as though the dust was gritted into the pores of my skin."

"It ain't onhealthy," Min returned dryly. "Some o' these old-timers live a year without seein' enough water to take a bath in. The sand gives 'em a sort of dry wash. It's clean dirt."

"Nothing like getting used to a point of view," whispered Sally Blanchard. "Fancy! A 'dry wash!' How do *you* feel, Rebecca Frayne?"

"Just as gritty as you do," was the prompt reply.

"All right then," laughed Ruth. "We all must have grit enough to hurry along and reach this Handy Gulch before the storm bursts."

Min told them that there was a "sure enough" hotel at the settlement they were approaching. It was a camp where hydraulic mining was being conducted on a large scale.

"The claims belong mostly to the Arepo Mining and Smelting Company. They have several mines through the Hualapai Range," said the guide. "This Handy place is quite a town. Only trouble is, there's two rum sellin' places. Most of the men's wages go back to the company through drink and cards, for they control the shops. But some day Arizona is goin' dry, and then we'll shut up all such joints."

"Dry!" coughed Helen. "Could anything be dryer than Arizona is right here and now?"

The seemingly tireless ponies carried the girls at a lope, or a gallop, all that forenoon. It was hard to get the eager little beasts to walk, and they never trotted. Miss Cullam claimed that everything inside of her had "come loose and was rattling around like dice in a box."

"Dear me, girls," sighed the teacher, "if this jumping and jouncing is really a healthful exercise, I shall surely taste death through an accident. But good health is something horrid to attain—in this way."

But in spite of the discomforts of the mode of travel, the party hugely enjoyed the outing. There were so many new and strange things to see, and one always came back to the same statement: "The air *is* lovely!"

There were certainly new things to see when they arrived at Handy Gulch just after lunch time,

not having stopped for that meal by the way. The camp consisted of fully a hundred wood and sheet-iron shacks, and the hotel was of two stories and was quite an important looking building.

Above the town, which squatted in a narrow valley through which a brawling and muddy stream flowed, was the "bench" from which the gold was being mined. There were four "guns" in use and these washed down the raw hillside into open sluices, the riffles of which caught the separated gold. The girls were shown a nugget found that very morning. It was as big as a walnut.

But most of the precious metal was found in tiny nuggets, or in dust, a grain of which seemed no larger than the head of a common pin.

However, although these things were interesting, the minute the cavalcade rode up to the hotel something much more interesting happened. There was a cry of welcome from within and out of the front door charged Jane Ann Hicks, dressed much as she used to be on the ranch—broad sombrero, a short fringed skirt over her riding breeches, high boots with spurs, and a gun slung at her belt.

"For the good land of love!" she demanded, seizing Ruth Fielding as the latter tumbled off her horse. "Where have you girls been? I was just about riding back to that Yucca place to look for you."

Jennie and Helen came in for a warm welcome, too. Ann was presented to Miss Cullam and the other two girls before explanations were made by anybody. Then Ruth demanded of the Montana girl a full and particular account of what she had done, and why.

"Why, I reckon that Miss Phelps ain't a friend of yours, after all?" queried Ann. "She's one frost, if she is."

"Now you've said something, Nita," said Jennie Stone. "She is a cold proposition. Can you tell us what she's doing out here?"

"I don't know. She sure enough comes from that college you girls attend, don't she?"

"She does!" admitted Helen. "She truly does. But she's not a sample of what Ardmore puts forth —don't believe it."

"I opine she's not a sample of any product, except orneriness," scolded Ann, who was a good deal put out by the strange actions of Edith Phelps. "You see how it was. My train was late. According to the telegram I found waiting for me, you folks should have arrived at Yucca hours ahead of me."

"And we were delayed," sighed Ruth. "Go on."

"I saw this Phelps girl," pursued Ann Hicks, "and asked her about you folks. She said you'd been and gone."

"Oh!" was the chorused exclamation from the other girls.

"And *she* is one of my pupils!" groaned Miss Cullam.

"She didn't learn to tell whoppers at your college, I guess," said Ann, bluntly. "Anyhow, she fooled me nicely. She said she was going over this very route you had taken and I could come along. She wouldn't let me pay any of the expenses—not even tip the guide. Only for my pony."

"But where is she now?" asked Ruth.

"And where is that Flapjack person—Min's father?" cried Jennie.

"We got here last night and put up at this hotel," Ann said, going steadily on with her story and not to be drawn away on any side issues. "We got here last night. Late in the evening somebody came to see this Phelps girl—a man."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Rebecca. "And she is traveling without a chaperon!"

" 'Chaperon'—huh!" ejaculated Ann. "She didn't need any chaperon. She can take care of herself all right. Well, she didn't come back and I went to bed. This morning I found a bit of paper on my pillow—here 'tis——"

"That's Edie's handwriting," Sally Blanchard said eagerly. "What does it say?"

" 'Good-bye. I am not going any farther with you. Wait, and your friends may overtake you.'

Just that," said Ann, with disgust. "Can you beat it?"

"What has that wild girl done, do you suppose?" murmured Miss Cullam.

"Oh, she isn't wild—not so's you'd notice it," said Ann. "Believe me, she knows her way about. And she shipped that guide."

"Discharged Mr. Peters, do you mean?" Ruth asked. Min was not in the room while this conversation was going on.

"H'm. Yes. *Mister* Peters. He's some sour dough, I should say! He was paid off and set down with money in his fist between two saloons. They're across the street from each other, and they tell me he's been swinging from one bar to the other like a pendulum ever since he was paid off."

"Poor Min!" sighed Ruth Fielding.

"Huh?" said Ann Hicks. "If he's got any folks, *I'm* sorry for 'em, too."

CHAPTER XII

MIN SHOWS HER METTLE

THERE were means to be obtained at the Handy Gulch Hotel for the baths that the tourists so much desired, even if tiled bathrooms and hot and cold water faucets were not in evidence.

The party lunched after making fresh toilets, and then set forth to view the "sights." Ruth inquired of Tom for Min; but their guide had disappeared the moment the party reached the hotel.

"She's acquainted here, I presume," said Tom Cameron. "Maybe she doesn't wish to be seen with you girls. Her outfit is so very different from yours."

"Poor Min!" murmured Ruth again. "Do you suppose she has found her father?"

Tom could not tell her that, and they trailed along behind the others, up toward the bench where the hydraulic mining was going on.

Only one of the nozzles was being worked—shooting a solid stream three inches in diameter into the hillside, and shaving off great slices that

melted and ran in a creamlike paste down into the sluice-boxes. Half a hundred "muckers" were at work with pick and shovel below the bench. The man managing the hydraulic machine stood astride of it, in hip boots and slicker, and guided the spouting stream of water along the face of the raw hill.

The party of spectators stood well out of the way, for the work of hydraulic mining has attached to it no little danger. The force of the stream from the nozzle of the machine is tremendous; and sometimes there are accidents, when many tons of the hillside unexpectedly cave down upon the bench.

The man astride the nozzle, however, took the matter coolly enough. He was smoking a short pipe and plowed along the face of the rubble with his deadly stream as easily as though he were watering a lawn.

"And if he should shoot it this way," said Tom, "he'd wash us down off the bench as though we were pebbles."

"Ugh! Let's not talk about that," murmured Rebecca Frayne, shivering.

"Oh, girls!" burst out Helen, "see that man, will you?"

"What man?" asked Trix.

"*Where* man?" demanded Jennie Stone.

"Running this way. Why! what can have hap-

pened?" Helen pursued. "Look, Tom, has there been an accident?"

A hatless man came running from the far end of the bench. He was swinging his arms and his mouth was wide open, though they could not hear what he was shouting. The noise of the spurting water and falling rubble drowned most other sounds.

"Why, girls," shouted Ann Hicks, and her voice rose above the noise of the hydraulic, "that's the feller that guided us up here. That's Peters!"

"Flapjack Peters?" repeated Tom. "The man acts as if he were crazy!"

The bewhiskered and roughly dressed man gave evidence of exactly the misfortune Tom mentioned. His eyes blazed, his manner was distraught, and he came on along the bench in great leaps, shouting unintelligibly.

"He is intoxicated. Let us go away," Miss Cullam said promptly.

But the excitement of the moment held the girls spellbound, and Miss Cullam herself merely stepped back a pace. A crowd of men were chasing the irrepressible Peters. Their shouts warned the fellow at the nozzle of the hydraulic machine.

He turned to look over his shoulder, the stream of water still plowing down the wall of gravel and soil. It bored directly into the hillside and down fell a huge lump, four or five tons of debris.

"Git back out o' here, ye crazy loon!" yelled the man, shifting the nozzle and bringing down another pile of rubble.

But Peters plunged on and in a moment had the other by the shoulders. With insane strength he tore the miner away from the machine and flung him a dozen feet. The stream of water shifted to the right as the hydraulic machine slewed around.

"Come away! Come away from that, Pop!" shrieked a voice, and the amazed Eastern girls saw Min Peters darting along the bench toward the scene.

Peters sprang astride the nozzle and shifted it quickly back and forth so that the water spread in all directions. He knew how to handle the machine; the peril lay in what he might decide to do with it.

"Come away from that, Pop!" shrieked Min again.

But her father flirted the stream around, threatening the girl and those who followed her. The men stopped. They knew what would happen if that solid stream of water collided with a human body!

"D'you hear me, Pop?" again cried the fearless girl. "You git off that pipe and let Bob have it."

Bob, the pipeman, was just getting to his feet—wrathful and muddy. But he did not attempt to

charge Peters. The latter again swept the stream along the hillside in a wide arc, bringing tons upon tons of gravel and soil down upon the bench. The narrow plateau was becoming choked with it. There was danger of his burying the hydraulic machine, as well as himself, in an avalanche.

The tourist party was in peril, too. They scarcely understood this at the moment, for things were transpiring so quickly that only seconds had elapsed since first Peters had approached.

The miners dared not come closer. But Min showed no fear She plunged in and caught him around the body, trying to confine his arms so that he could not slew the nozzle to either side.

This helped the situation but little. For half a minute the stream shot straight into the hillside; then another great lump fell.

At the same moment Peters threw her off, and Min went rolling over and over in the mud as Bob had gone. But she was up again in a moment and made another spring for the man.

And then suddenly, quite as unexpectedly as the riot had started, it was all over. The hurtling, hissing stream of water fell to a wabbling, futile out-pouring; then to a feeble dribble from the pipe's nozzle. The water had been shut off below.

The miners pyramided upon him, and in half a minute Flapjack Peters was "spread-eagled" on the muddy bench, held by a dozen brawny arms.

"Wait! wait!" cried Ruth, running forward. "Don't hurt him. Take care——"

"Don't hurt him, Miss?" growled Bob, the man who had been flung aside. "We ought to nigh about knock the daylights out o' him. Look what he done to me."

"But you mustn't! He's not responsible," Ruth Fielding urged.

The miners dragged Peters to his feet and there was blood on his face. Here is where Min showed the metal that was in her again. She sprang in among the angry miners to her father's side.

"Don't none of you forgit he's my pop," she threatened in a tone that held the girls who listened spellbound and amazed.

"You ain't got no call to beat him up. You know he can't stand red liquor; yet some of you helped him drink of it las' night. Ain't that the truth?"

Bob was the first to admit her statement. "I s'pose you're right, Min. We done drunk with him."

"Sure! You helped him waste his money. Then, when he goes loco like he always does, you're for beatin' of him up. My lawsy! if there's anything on top o' this here airth more ornery than that I ain't never seen it."

CHAPTER XIII

AN URSINE HOLDUP

PETERS was still struggling with his captors and talking wildly. He evidently did not know his own daughter.

"Well, what you goin' to do with him?" demanded Bob, the pipeman. "We ain't expected to stand and hold him all day, if we ain't goin' to be 'lowed to hang him—the ornery critter!"

"You shet up, Bob Davis!" said Min. "You ain't no pulin' infant yourself when you're drunk, and you know it."

The other men began laughing at the angry miner, and Bob admitted:

"Well, s'posin' that's so? I'm sober now. And I got work to do. So's these other fellows. What you want done with Flapjack?"

Ruth Fielding was so deeply interested for Min's sake that she could not help interfering.

"Oh, Min, isn't there a doctor in this camp?"

"Yes'm. Doc Quibbly. He's here, ain't he, boys?"

"The old doc's down to his office in the tin shack beyant the hotel," said one. "I seen him not an hour ago."

"Let's take your father to the hotel, Min," Ruth said. "These men will help us, I know. So will Tom Cameron. We will have the doctor look after your father."

"The old doc can dope him a-plenty, I reckon," said Bob.

"Sure we'll help you," said the rough fellows, who were not really hard-hearted after all.

"I dunno's they'll let him into the hotel," Min said.

"Yes they will. We'll pay for his room and you and the doctor can look out for him," Ruth declared.

"You are good and helpful, Ruth Fielding," said Miss Cullam, coming forward, much as she despised the condition of the man, Peters. "How terrible! But one must be sorry for that poor girl."

"And Min has pluck all right!" cried Jennie Stone, admiringly. "We must help her."

They were all agreed in this. Even Rebecca and Miss Cullam, who both shrank from the coarseness of the men and the roughness of Min and her father, commiserated the man's misfortune and were sorry for Min's strait.

Tom assisted in leading the wildly-talking

Peters to the hotel. Ruth and Miss Cullam hurried on in advance to engage a room for the man whom they assured the proprietor was really ill. Min, meanwhile, went in search of the camp's medical practitioner.

Dr. Quibbly was a gray-bearded man with keen eyes but palsied hands. He had plainly been wrecked by misfortune or some disease; but he had been left with all his mental powers unimpaired.

He took hold of the distraught Peters in a capable manner; and Tom, who remained to help nurse the patient, declared to Ruth and Helen that he never hoped to see a doctor who knew his business better than Dr. Quibbly knew it.

"He had Peters quiet in half an hour. No harmful drug, either. Told me everything he used. Says rest, and milk and eggs to build up the stomach, is all the chap needs. Min's with him now and I'm going to sleep in my blanket outside the door to-night, so if she needs anybody I'll be within call."

It had been rather an exciting experience for the girls and they remained in their rooms for the rest of the day. The hotel proprietor offered to take them around at night and "show them the sights"; but as that meant visiting the two saloons and gambling halls, Miss Cullam refused for the party, rather tartly.

"No offence meant, Ma'am," said the hotel man, Mr. Bennett. "But most of the tenderfeet that come here hanker to 'go slumming,' as they call it. They want to see these here miners at their amusements, as well as at their daily occupations."

"I'd rather see them at church," Miss Cullam told him frankly. "I think they need it."

"Good glory, Ma'am!" exclaimed the man. "We git that, too—once a month. What more kin you expect?"

"I suppose," Miss Cullam said to her girls, "that a perfectly straight-laced New England old maid could not be set down in a more inappropriate place than a mining camp."

The speech gave Ruth a suggestion for a scene in the picture play of "The Forty-niners," and she would have been delighted to have the Ardmore teacher play a part in that scene.

"However," she said to Helen, whispering it over in bed that night, "it will be funny. I know Mr. Hammond will bring plenty of costumes of the period of forty-nine, for he wants women in the show. And there will be some character actress who can take the part of an unsophisticated blue stocking from the Hub, who arrives at the camp in the midst of the miner's revelry."

"Oh, my!" gasped Helen. "Miss Cullam will think you are making fun of her."

"No she won't——the dear thing! She has too much good sense. But she *has* given me what Tom would call a dandy idea."

"Isn't it nice to have Tom—or somebody—to lay our use of slang to?" said Ruth's chum demurely.

The party did not leave Handy Gulch the next day, nor the day following. There were several excuses given for this delay and they were all good.

One of the ponies had developed lameness; and a burro wandered away and Pedro had to spend half a day searching for him. Perhaps the Mexican lad would have been quicker about this had Min been on hand to hurry him. But having been close beside her father all night she lay down for needed sleep while Tom Cameron and the doctor took her place.

The report from the sickroom was favorable. In a few hours the man who had come so near to bringing about a tragedy in Handy Gulch would be fit to travel. Ruth declared that she would wait for him, and he should go along with the party to Freezeout.

"But you are our guide and general factotum, Min. We depend on you," she told the sick man's daughter.

"I dunno what that thing is you called me; but I guess it ain't a bad name," said Min Peters.

"If you'll jest let pop trail along so's I kin watch him he'll be as good as pie, I know."

Then, there was Miss Cullam's reason for not wishing to start. She said she was "saddle sick."

"I have been seasick, and trainsick; but I think saddlesick must be the worst, for it lasts longer. I can lie in bed now," said the poor woman, "and feel myself wabbling just as I do in that hateful saddle.

"Oh, dear, me, Ruthie Fielding! I wish I had never agreed to come without demanding a comfortable carriage."

"They tell me that there are places on the trail before we get to Freezeout so narrow that a carriage can't be used. The wagons are going miles and miles around so as to escape the rough places of the straighter trail."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Miss Cullam in disgust. "Is it necessary to get to Freezeout Camp in such a short time? I tell you right now: I am going to rest in bed for two days."

And she did. The girls were not worried, however. They found plenty to see and to do about the mining town. As for Ruth, she set to work on her scenario, and kept Rebecca Frayne busy with the typewriter, too. She sketched out the scene she had mentioned to Helen, and it was so funny that Rebecca giggled all the time she was typewriting it.

"Goodness!" murmured Ruth. "I hope the audiences will think it is as funny as you do. The only trouble is, unless a good deal of the conversation is thrown on the screen, they will miss some of the best points. Dear me! Such is fate. I was born to be a humorist—a real humorist—in a day and age when 'custard-pie comedians' have the right-of-way."

The third day the party started bright and early on the Freezeout trail. Flapjack Peters was well enough to ride; and he was woefully sorry for what he had done. But he was still too much "twisted" in his mind to be able to tell Ruth just how he came to start away from Yucca with Edith Phelps and Ann Hicks, instead of waiting for the entire party to arrive.

Ann had told all she knew about it at her meeting with Ruth. It remained a mystery why Edith had come to Yucca; why she had kept Ann and her friends apart; and why at Handy Gulch she had abandoned both Ann and Flapjack Peters.

"She met a man here, that's all I know," said Ann, with disgust.

"Maybe it was the man who wrote her from Yucca," said Helen to Ruth.

" 'Box twenty-four, R. F. D., Yucca, Arizona,' " murmured Ruth. "We should have made inquiries in Yucca about the person who has his mail come to that postbox."

"These hindsights that should have been foresights are the limit!" groaned Helen. "We must admit that Edie Phelps has put one over on us. But what it is she has done *I* do not comprehend."

"That is what bothers me," Ruth said, shaking her head.

They set off on this day from the Gulch in a spirit of cheerfulness, and ready for any adventure. However, none of the party—not a soul of it—really expected what did happen before the end of the day.

As usual the pony cavalcade got ahead of the burros in the forenoon. The little animals would go only so fast no matter what was done to them.

"You could put a stick of dynamite under one o' them critters," Min said, "and he'd rise slow-like. 'Hurry up' ain't knowed to the burros' language—believe me!"

The pony cavalcade was halted most surprisingly about noon, and in a way which bid fair to delay the party until the burros caught up, if not longer. They had got well into the hills. The cliffs rose on either hand to towering heights. Thick and scrubby woods masked the sides of the gorge through which they rode.

"It is as wild as one could imagine," said Miss Cullam, riding with Tom in the lead. "What do you suppose is the matter with my pony, Mr. Cameron?"

Tom had begun to be puzzled about his own mount—a wise old, flea-bitten gray. The ponies had pricked their ears forward and were snuffing the air as though there was some unpleasant odor assailing their nostrils.

"I don't know just what is the matter," Tom confessed. "But these creatures can see and smell a lot that *we* can't, Miss Cullam. Perhaps we had better halt and——"

He got no further. They were just rounding an elbow in the trail. There before them, rising up on their haunches in the path, were three gray and black bears!

"Ow-yow!" shrieked Jennie Stone. "Do you girls see the same things *I* do?"

To those ahead, however, it seemed no matter for laughter. The bears—evidently a female with two cubs—were too close for fun-making.

CHAPTER XIV

AT FREEZEOUT CAMP

THERE is nothing really savage looking about a bear unless it *is* savage. Otherwise a bear has a rather silly looking countenance. These three bears had been walking peacefully down the trail, and were surprised at the sudden appearance of the cavalcade of ponies from around the bend, for such wind as was stirring was blowing down the trail.

The larger bear, the mother of the two half-grown cubs, instantly realized the danger of their position. It may have looked like an ursine hold-up to the tourists; but old Mother Bear was quite sure she and her cubs were in man-peril.

She growled fiercely, cuffing her cubs right and left and sending them scuttling and whining off into the bushes. She roared at the startled pony riders and did not descend from her haunches.

She looked terrible enough then. Her teeth, fully displayed, promised to tear and rend both ponies and riders if they came near enough.

Miss Cullam was speechless with fright. The ponies had halted, snorting; but for the first minute or so none of them backed away from the threatening beast.

The hair rose stiffly on the bear's neck and she uttered a second challenging growl. Tom had pulled out his automatic; but he had already learned that at any considerable distance this weapon was not to be depended upon. Min's forty-five threw a bullet where one aimed; not so the newfangled weapon.

Besides, the bear was a big one and it really looked as though a pistol ball would be an awfully silly thing to throw at it.

Rebecca Frayne had just begun to cry and Sally Blanchard was begging everybody to "come away," when Min Peters slipped around from the rear to the head of the column.

"Hold on to your horses, girls," she whispered shrilly. "Mebbe some of 'em's gun-shy. Steady now—and we'll have bear's tongue and liver for supper."

"Oh, Minnie!" squealed Helen.

Min was not to be disturbed from her purpose by any hysterical girl. She was not depending upon her forty-five for the work in hand. She had brought her father's rifle from Handy Gulch; and now it came in use most opportunely.

The bear was still on its haunches and still roar-

ing when Min got into position. The beast was an easy mark, and the Western girl dropped on one knee, thus steadying her aim, for the rifle was heavy.

The bear roared again; then the rifle roared. The latter almost knocked Min over, the recoil was so great. But the shot quite knocked the bear over. The heavy slug of lead had penetrated the beast's heart and lungs.

She staggered forward, the blood spouted from her wide open jaws as well as from her breast; and finally she came down with a crash upon the hard trail. She was quite dead before she hit the ground.

There was screaming enough then. Everybody save Ann Hicks and Tom, perhaps, had quite lost his self-control. Such a jabbering as followed!

"Goodness me, girls," drawled Jennie Stone at last, raising her voice so as to be heard. "Goodness me! Min just wasted that perfectly good lead bullet. We could easily have talked that poor bear to death."

It had been rather a startling incident, however, and they were not likely to stop talking about it immediately. Miss Cullam was more than frightened by the event; she felt that she had been misled.

"I had no idea there were actually wild creatures like those bears in this country, Ruth Field-

ing. I certainly never would have come had I realized it. You could not have hired me to come on this trip."

"But, dear Miss Cullam," Ruth said, somewhat troubled because the lady was, "I really had no idea they were here."

"I assure you," Helen said soberly, "that the bears did not appear by *my* invitation, much as I enjoy mild excitement."

"'Mild excitement'!" breathed Rebecca Frayne. "My word!"

"And those other two bears are loose and may attack us," pursued Miss Cullam.

"They were only cubs, Miss," said Min, who, with her father, was already at work removing the bear's pelt. "They're running yet. And I shouldn't have shot this critter only it might have done some damage, being mad because of its young. We may have to explain this shootin' to the game wardens. There's a closed season for bears like there is for game birds. There ain't many left."

"And do they really want to keep any of the horrid creatures *alive?*" demanded Trix Davenport.

"Yes. Bear shootin' attracts tenderfoots; and tenderfoots have money to spend. That's the how of it," explained Min.

The ponies did not like the smell of the bear, and they were all drawn ahead on the trail. But

the cavalcade waited for Pedro and the burros to overtake them; then the load on one burro was transferred to the ponies and the pelt and as much of the bear meat as they could make use of in such warm weather was put upon the burro.

"Not that either the skin or the meat's much good this time o' year. She ain't got fatted up yet after sucklin' them cubs. But, anyway, you kin say ye had bear meat when you git back East," Min declared practically.

The girls went on after that with their eyes very wide open. Miss Cullam declared that she knew she never would forget how those three bears looked standing on their hind legs and "glaring" at her.

"Glaring!" repeated Jennie Stone. "All I could see was that old bear's open mouth. It quite swallowed up her eyes."

"What an acrobatic feat!" sighed Trix Davenport. "You *do* have an imagination, Jennie Stone."

The event did not pass over as a matter for laughter altogether; the girls had really been given a severe fright. Min was obliged to ride ahead, or the tourists never would have rounded a bend in the trail in real comfort. It was probable that the Western girl had a hearty contempt for their cowardice. "But what could you expect of tenderfoots?" she grumbled to Ann Hicks.

"D'you know," said the girl from Silver Ranch to the girl guide, "that is what I used to think about these Eastern girlies—that they were only babies. But just because they are gun-shy, and are unused to many of the phases of outdoor life with which you and I are familiar, Min, doesn't make them altogether useless.

"Believe me, my dear! when it comes to book learning, and knowing how to dress, and being used to the society game, these girls from Ardmore are *sharks!*"

"I reckon that's right," agreed Min. "I watched 'em come off the train in Yucca, and they looked like they'd just stepped out of a mail-order house catalogue. Such fixin's!" and the girl who had never worn proper feminine clothing sighed longingly at the remembrance of the Ardmore girls' traveling dresses and hats.

The more Min saw of the Eastern girls, the more desirous she was of being like them—*in* some ways, at least. She might sneer at their lack of physical courage; nevertheless, she was well aware that they were used to many things of which she knew very little. And there never was a girl born who did not long for pretty clothes, and who did not wish to appear attractive in the eyes of others.

Helen and Jennie had not forgotten their idea of dressing their guide in some of their furbelows.

"Just wait till our trunks get to that Freezeout place, along with your movie people, Ruth," said Jennie. "We'll just doll poor Min all up."

"That's an idea!" exclaimed the girl of the Red Mill, her mind quick to absorb any suggestion relative to her art. "I can put Min in the picture—if she will agree. Show her as she is, then have her metamorphosised into a pretty girl—for she *is* pretty."

"From the ugly caterpillar to the butterfly," cried Helen.

"A regular Bret Harte character—queen of the mining camp," said Jennie. "You can give me a share of your royalties, Ruth, for this suggestion."

Ruth had so many ideas in her head for scenes at the mining camp that she was anxious to get over the trail and reach Freezeout. By this time Mr. Hammond and his outfit must have arrived at Yucca.

The trail was rough, however, and the cavalcade of college girls could travel only about so fast. Those unfamiliar with saddle work, like Miss Cullam, found the journey hard enough.

At night they had to camp in the open, after leaving Handy Gulch; and because of the appearance of the bears, there were two guards set at night, and the fires were kept up. Tom and Pedro took half the watch, and then Min and her father took their turn.

Nothing happened of moment, however, during the three nights that ensued before the party reached the abandoned camp of Freezeout. They came down into the "draw" or arroyo in which the old mining camp lay late one afternoon. A more deserted-looking place could scarcely be imagined.

There were half a hundred log cabins, of assorted sizes and in different stages of dilapidation. The air was so dry and so little rain fell in this part of Arizona that the log walls of the structures were in fairly good condition, and not all the roofs had fallen in.

Min and her father, with Tom Cameron, searched among the cabins to find those most suitable for occupancy. But it was Ruth Fielding who discovered something that startled the whole party.

"See here! See here!" she called. "I've found something."

"What is it?" asked Tom. "More bears?"

"No. Somebody has been ahead of us here. Perhaps we are not alone in having an interest in this Freezeout place."

"What do you mean, Ruthie?" cried Helen, running to her chum.

"Here are the remains of a campfire. The ashes are still warm. Somebody camped here last night, that is sure. Do you suppose they are here now?"

CHAPTER XV

MORE DISCOVERIES

A QUICK but thorough search of the abandoned mining camp revealed no living person save the party of tourists themselves.

Ruth's inquiry for the persons who had built the campfire aroused the curiosity of Min Peters and her father, and they made some investigations for which the girl from the East scarcely saw the reason.

"If we've got neighbors here, might's well know who they are," said Flapjack, who was gradually finding his voice and was "spunking up," according to his daughter's statement.

Peters was particularly anxious to please. He felt deeply the humiliation of what he had gone through at Handy Gulch, and wished to show Ruth and the other girls that he was of some account.

No Indian could have scrutinized the vicinity of the dead campfire which Ruth had found more carefully than he did. Finally he announced that

two men had been here at the abandoned settlement the night before.

"One big feller and a mighty little man. I don't know what to make of that little feller's footprints," said the old prospector. "Mebbe he ain't only a boy. But they camped here—sure. And they've gone on—right out through the dry watercourse an' toward the east. I reckon they was harmless."

"They surely will be harmless if they keep on going and never come back," laughed Ruth. "But I hope there are not many idlers hanging about this neighbourhood. I suppose there are some bad characters in these hills?"

"About as bad as tramps are in town," said Min, scornfully. "You folks from the East do have funny ideas. Ev'ry other man out here ain't a train robber nor a cattle rustler. No, ma'am!"

"The movie company will supply all those, I fancy," chuckled Jennie Stone. "Going to have a real, bad road agent in your play, Ruthie?"

"Never mind what I am going to have," retorted Ruth, shaking her head. "I mean to have just as true a picture as possible of the old-time gold diggings; and that doesn't mean that guns are flourished every minute or two. Mr. Peters can help me a lot by telling me what he remembers of this very camp, I know."

Flapjack was greatly pleased at this. Although

Ruth continued to keep Min, the girl guide, to the fore, she saw that the girl's father was going to be vastly pleased by being made of some account.

It was he who advised which of the cabins should be made habitable for the party. One was selected for the girls and Miss Cullam to sleep in; another for the men; and a third for a kitchen.

But Flapjack made supper that night in the open as usual. For the first time he proudly displayed to the girls from the East the talent by which his nickname originated.

Min made a great "crock" of batter and greased the griddles for him. Flapjack stood, red faced and eager, over the bed of live coals and handled the two griddles in an expert manner.

The cakes were as large as breakfast plates, and were browned to a beautiful shade—one fried in each griddle. When the time came to turn them, Flapjack Peters performed this delicate operation by tossing them into the air, and with such a sleight of hand that the flapjacks exchanged griddles in their "turnover."

"Dear me!" murmured Miss Cullam. "Such acrobatic cooking I never beheld. But the cakes are remarkably tasty."

"Aeroplane pancakes," suggested Tom Cameron. "Believe me, they are as light as they fly, too."

That night the party was particularly jolly.

They had reached their destination and, as Miss Cullam said in relief, without dire mishap.

The girls were, after all, glad to shut a door against the whole outside world when they went to bed; although the windows were merely holes in the cabin walls through which the air had a perfectly free circulation.

There were six bunks in the cabin; but only one of them was put in proper condition for use. Miss Cullam was given that and the girls rolled up in their blankets on the floor, with their saddles, as usual, for pillows.

"We have got so used to camping out of doors," Helen Cameron said, "that we shall be unable to sleep in our beds when we get home."

In the morning, however, the first work Min started was to fill bags with dried grass from the hillsides and make mattresses for all the bunks. Tom had brought along hammer and nails as well as a saw, and with the old prospector's assistance he repaired the remainder of the bunks in the girls' cabin and put up three new ones. There was plenty of building material about the camp.

Ruth, meantime, cleared out a fourth cabin. Here was set up the typewriter, and she and Rebecca Frayne planned to make the hut their workshop.

"You girls, as long as you don't leave the confines of the camp alone, are welcome to go where

you please, only, save, and excepting to the sanctum sanctorum," Ruth said at lunch time. "I am going to put up a sign over the door, 'Beware.' "

"But surely, Ruth, you're not going to work *all* the time?" complained Helen.

"How are we going to have any fun, Ruth Fielding, if you keep out of it?" demanded Ann Hicks.

"I shall get up early and work in the forenoon. While the mood is on me and my mind is fresh, you know," laughed Ruth. "That is, I shall do that after I really get to work. First I must 'soak in' local color."

She did this by wandering alone through the shallow gorge, from the first, or lower "diggings," up to the final abandoned claim, where the gold pockets had petered out. There were hundreds of places about the old camp where the gold hunters had dug in hope of finding the precious metal.

Ruth really knew little about this work. But she had learned from hearing Min and her father talk that, wherever there was gold in "pockets" and "streaks" in the sand there must somewhere near be "a mother lode." Flapjack confessed to having spent weeks looking for that mother lode about Freezeout Camp. It had never been discovered.

"And after the Chinks got through with this here place, you couldn't find a pinch of placer gold

big enough t' fill your pipe," the old prospector announced. "I reckon she's here somewhere; but there won't nobody find her now."

Ruth saw some things that made her wonder if somebody had not been looking for gold here much more recently than Flapjack Peters supposed. In three separate places beside the brawling stream that ran down the gorge, it seemed to her the heaped up sand was still wet. She knew about "cradling"—that crude manner of separating gold from the soil; and it seemed to her as though somebody had recently tried for "color" along the edge of this stream.

However, Ruth Fielding's mind was fixed upon something far different from placer mining. She was brooding over a motion picture, and she was determined to turn out a better scenario than she had ever before written.

Hazel Gray, whom Ruth and her chum, Helen, had met a year and a half before, and who had played the heroine's part in "The Heart of a Schoolgirl," was to come on with Mr. Hammond and his company to play the chief woman's part in the new drama. For there was to be a strong love interest in the story, and that thread of the plot was already quite clear in Ruth's mind.

She had recently, however, considered Min Peters as a foil for Hazel Gray. Min was exactly the type of girl to fit into the story of "The

Forty-Niners. As for her ability to act——

"There is no girl who can't act, if she gets the chance, I am sure," thought Ruth. "Only, some can act better than others."

Ruth really had little doubt about Min's ability to play the part that she had thought out for her. Only, would she do it? Would she feel that her own character and condition in life was being held up to ridicule? Ruth had to be careful about that.

On returning to the camp she said nothing about the discoveries she had made along the bank of the stream. But that evening, after supper, as the whole party were grouped before the cabins they had now made fairly comfortable, Trix Davenport suddenly startled them all by crying:

"See there! Who's that?"

"Who's where, Trixie?" asked Jennie, lazily. "Are you seeing things?"

"I certainly am," said the diminutive girl.

"So do I!" Sally exclaimed. "There's a man on horseback."

In the purple dusk they saw him mounting a distant ridge east of the stream—almost on the confines of the valley on that side. It was only for a minute that he held in his horse and seemed to be gazing down at the fire flickering in the principal street of Freezeout Camp.

Then he rode on, out of sight.

CHAPTER XVI

NEW ARRIVALS

"'THE lone horseman riding into the purple dusk,' à la the sensational novelist," chuckled Jennie Stone. "Who do you suppose that was, Min?"

"Dunno," declared the Yucca girl. But it was plain she was somewhat disturbed by the appearance of the horseman. And so was Flapjack.

They whispered together over their own fire, and Flapjack warned Tom Cameron to be sure that his automatic was well oiled and that he kept it handy during his turn at watching the camp that night.

Morning came, however, without anything more threatening than the almost continuous howling of a coyote.

Ruth, who wandered about a little by herself the second day at Freezeout, saw Flapjack go over to the ridge where they had seen the lone horseman. He came back, shaking his had.

"Who was the man, Mr. Peters?" she asked him curiously.

"Dunno, Miss. He ain't projectin' around here now, that's sure. His pony done took him away from there on a gallop. But there ain't many single men that's honest hoverin' about these parts."

"What do you mean?" asked the surprised Ruth. "That only married men are to be trusted in Arizona?"

He grinned at her. "You're some joker, Miss," he replied. Then, seeing that the girl was genuinely puzzled, he added: "I mean that 'nless a man's got something to be 'fraid of, he usually has a partner in these regions. 'Tain't healthy to prospect round alone. Something might happen to you—rock fall on you, or you git took sick, and then there ain't nobody to do for you, or for to ride for the doctor."

"Oh!"

"Men that's bein' chased by the sheriff, on t'other hand," went on Flapjack, frankly, "sometimes prefers to be alone. You git me?"

"I understand," admitted the girl of the Red Mill. "But don't let Miss Cullam hear you say it. She will be determined to start back for the railroad at once, if you do."

Flapjack promised to say nothing to disturb the rest of the party, and Ruth knew she could trust Min's good judgment. But she began to worry in her own mind about who the strange horseman could be, and about his business near

Freezeout Camp. She naturally connected the unknown with the traces she had seen of recent placer washings and with the campfire the ashes of which had been warm when her party arrived.

With these suspicions, those that had centered about Edith Phelps in Ruth's mind, began to be connected. She could not explain it. It did not seem possible that the Ardmore sophomore could have any real interest in the making of this picture of "The Forty-Niners." Yet, why had Edith come into the Hualapai Range?

Why Edith had kept Ann Hicks from meeting her friends as soon as they arrived at Yucca was more easily understood. Edith wished to get ahead of Ruth's party on the trail without her presence in Arizona being known to the freshman party.

But why, *why* had she come? The perplexing question returned to Ruth Fielding's mind time and again.

And the man who had met Edith and with whom she had presumably ridden away from Handy Gulch—who could *he* be? Had the two come to Freezeout Camp, and were they lingering about the vicinity now? Was the stranger on horseback revealed against the skyline the evening before, Edith Phelps' comrade?

"If I take any of the girls into my confidence about this," thought Ruth, "it will not long be a

secret. Perhaps, too, I might frighten them needlessly. Surely Edith, and whoever she is with, cannot mean us any real harm. Better keep still and see what comes of it."

It bothered her, however. And it coaxed her mind away from the important matter of the scenario. However, she was doing pretty well with that and Rebecca had several scenes of the first two episodes ready for Mr. Hammond.

That afternoon, while she was absorbed in sketching out the third episode of her scenario, and Rebecca was beating the typewriter keys in busy staccato, Helen came running from the far end of the camp and burst into the sanctum sanctorum in wild disorder.

"What do you mean?" demanded her chum, almost angry at Helen's thoughtlessness. "Don't you know that I am supposed to be 'dead to the world'?"

"Oh, Ruthie, forgive me! But I had to tell you at once. There's a strange woman about the camp. Miss Cullam and I both saw her."

"A strange woman!" repeated Ruth. "I'm sure Miss Cullam didn't send you hotfoot to tell me."

"No-o. But I had to tell you—I just *had* to," Helen declared. "Don't be mean, Ruthie. *Do* take an interest in something besides your old movie picture."

"Why, I am interested," admitted Ruth. "But who is this strange woman?"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Helen. "That's just what's the matter. We don't know. We didn't see her face. She had a big shawl—or a Navajo blanket—around her."

"An Indian squaw!" exclaimed Rebecca who could not help hearing. "I'd like to see one myself."

"We-ell, maybe she was an Indian squaw," admitted Helen, slowly. "But why did she run from us?"

"Afraid of you," chuckled Ruth. "I expect to the eyes of the untutored savage you and Miss Cullam looked perfectly awful."

"Now, Ruth!"

"But why bring your conundrums to me—just when I am busiest, too?"

"Well, I never! I thought you might be interested," sniffed Helen.

"I am, dear. But don't you see that your news is so—er—*sketchy?* I might be perfectly enthralled about this Indian squaw if I really met her. Capture her and bring her into camp."

Helen went off rather offended. As it happened, it was Ruth herself who was destined to learn more about the mysterious woman, as well as the lone horseman. But much happened before that.

Before the end of the week Mr. Hammond rode into Freezeout with a nondescript outfit, including a dozen workmen prepared to put the old camp into shape for the making of the great film.

The old camp became a busy place immediately. Flapjack Peters "came out strong," as his daughter expressed it, at this juncture. His memory of old times at these very diggings and at similar mines proved to be keen, and he became a valuable aid to Mr. Hammond.

Four days later the wagons appeared and the girls got their trunks. That very night there was a "regular party" in one of the old saloons and dancehalls that chanced, even after all these years, to be habitable.

One of the teamsters had brought his fiddle, and at the prospect of a dance, even with the paucity of men, the Ardmore girls were delighted. But, to tell the truth, the "party" was arranged more for the sake of Min Peters than for aught else.

"She's got to get used to wearing fit clothes before those movie people come," Ann Hicks said firmly. "You leave it to me, girls. I know how to coax her on."

And Ann proved the truth of her statement. Not that Min was not eager to see herself "all dolled up," as Jennie called it, in one of the two big mirrors the wagons had brought along for use in the actresses' dressing cabins. But she was

fiercely independent, and to suggest that she accept the college girls' frocks and furbelows as gifts would have angered her.

But Ann induced her to "borrow" the things needed, and from the trunks of all were obtained the articles necessary to make Min Peters appear at the party as well dressed as any girl need be. Nor was she so awkward as some had feared.

"And pretty was no name for it."

"See there!" cried Helen, under her breath, to her chum. "The girl is cutting you out, Ruth, with old Tommy-boy. He's asked her to dance."

Ruth only smiled at this. She had put Tom up to that herself, for she learned from Ann that the Yucca girl knew how to dance.

"Of course she can. There is scarcely a girl in the West who doesn't dance. Goodness, Ruthie! don't you remember how crazy they were for dancing around Silver Ranch, and the fun we had at the schoolhouse dance at The Crossing? Maybe we ain't on to all those new foxtrots and tangos; but we can *dance*."

So it proved with Min. She flushed deeply when Tom asked her, and she hesitated. Then, seeing the other girls whirling about the floor, two and two, the temptation to "show 'em" was too much. She accepted Tom's invitation and the young fellow admitted afterward that he had danced with "a lot worse girls back East."

Before the evening was over, Min was supremely happy. And perhaps the effect on her father was quite as important as upon Min herself. For the first time in her life he saw his daughter in the garb of girls of her age—saw her as she should be.

"By mighty!" the man muttered, staring at Min. "I don't git it—not right. Is that sure 'nuff my girl?"

"You should be proud of her," said Mr. Hammond, who heard the old-timer say this. "She deserves a lot from you, Peters. I understand she's been your companion on all your prospecting trips since her mother died."

"That's right. She's been the old man's best friend. She's skookum. But I had no idee she'd look like that when she was fussed up same's other girls. She's been more like a boy to me."

"Well, she's no boy, you see," Mr. Hammond said dryly.

Out of the dance, however, Ruth gained her desire. She explained to Min that she needed just her to make the motion picture complete. And Min, bashfully enough but gratefully, agreed to act the part of the "lookout" in the "palace of pleasure" afterward appearing in a girl's garb in the hotel parlor.

Ruth was deep in her story now and could give attention to little else. Mr. Grimes and the mo-

tion picture company would arrive in a week, and by that time the several important buildings would be ready and the main street of Freezeout appear as it had been when the placer diggings were in full swing.

Something happened before the company arrived, however, which was of an astounding nature. Ruth, riding with Helen and Jennie one afternoon east of the camp, came upon the ridge where the lone horseman had been observed. And here, overhanging the gorge, was a place where the quartz ledge had been laid bare by pick and shovel.

"See that rock, girls? Look, how it sparkles!" said Helen. "Suppose it should be a vein of gold?"

"Suppose it *is!*" cried Jennie, scrambling off her horse.

"'Fools' gold,' more likely, girls," Ruth said.

"What is that?" demanded Jennie.

"Pyrites. But we might take some samples and show them to Flapjack."

"Do you suppose that old fellow actually knows gold-bearing quartz when he sees it?" asked Helen, in doubt.

They picked up several pieces of the broken rock, and that evening after supper showed Peters and Min their booty. Flapjack actually turned pale when he saw it.

"Where'd you git this, Miss?" he asked Ruth.

"Well, it isn't two miles from here," said the girl of the Red Mill. "What do you think of it?"

"I think this here is a placer diggin's," said Peters, slowly. "But it's sure that wherever there's placer there must be a rock-vein where the gold washed off, or was ground off, ages and ages ago. D'you understand?"

"Yes!" cried Helen, breathlessly.

"Oh! suppose we have found gold!" murmured Jennie, quite as excited as Helen.

"The rock-vein ain't never been found around here," said Flapjack. "I know, for I've hunted it myself. Both banks of the crick, up an' down, have been s'arched——"

"But suppose this was found a good way from the stream?"

"Mebbe so," said the old prospector. "The crick might ha' shifted its bed a dozen times since the glacier age. We don't know."

"But how shall we find out if this rock is any good?" asked Jennie, eagerly.

"Mr. Hammond's goin' to send a man out to Handy Gulch with mail to-morrow," said the prospector. He'll send these samples to the assayer there. He'll send back word whether it's good for anything or not. But I tell you right now, ladies. If I'm any jedge at all, that ore'll assay a hundred an' fifty dollars to the ton—or nothin'."

CHAPTER XVII

THE MAN IN THE CABIN

WHY, of course they could not keep it to themselves! At least, the three girls could not. They simply had to tell Miss Cullam and Tom, and the other Ardmore freshmen and Ann of their discovery.

So every day after that the visitors from the East "went prospecting." They searched up and down the creek for several miles, turning over every bit of "sparkling" rock they saw and bringing back to the camp innumerable specimens of quartz and mica, until Mr. Hammond declared they were all "gold mad."

"Why, this place has been petered out for years and years," he said. "Do you suppose I want my actors leaving me to stake out claims along Freeze-out Creek, and spoiling my picture? Stop it!"

The idea of gold hunting had got into the girls, however, as well as into Flapjack Peters and his daughter. The other Western men laughed at them. Gold this side of the Hualapai Range had

"petered out." They looked upon the old-timer as a little cracked on the subject. And, of course, these "tenderfoots" did not know anything about "color" anyway.

Even Miss Cullam searched along the creek banks and up into the low hills that surrounded the valley.

"Who knows," said the teacher of mathematics, "but that I may find a fortune, and so be able to eschew the teaching of the young for the rest of my life? Gorgeous!"

"But pity the 'young'," begged Jennie Stone. "Think, Miss Cullam, how we would miss you."

"I can hardly imagine that you would suffer," declared the mathematics teacher. "Really!"

"We might not miss the mathematics," said Rebecca, wickedly. "But you are the very best chaperon who ever 'beaued' a party of girls into the wilds. Isn't that the truth, Ardmores?"

"It is!" they cried. "Hurrah for Miss Cullam!"

Ruth, however, despite the discovery of the possibly gold-bearing quartz, was not to be coaxed from her work. Each morning she shut herself into the "sanctum sanctorum" and worked faithfully at the scenario. Likewise, Rebecca stuck to the typewriter, for she had work to do for Mr. Hammond now, as well as for Ruth.

Some part of each afternoon Ruth took for ex-

ercise in the open. And usually she took this exercise on ponyback.

Riding alone out of the shallow gorge one day, she struck into what seemed to her a bridlepath which led into "dips" and valleys in the hills which she had never before seen. Nothing more had been observed of either the lone horseman or the supposed squaw for so many days that their presence about Freezeout Camp had quite slipped Ruth Fielding's mind.

Besides, there were so many men at the camp now that to have fear of strangers was never in the girl's thoughts. She urged her hardy pony into a gallop and sped down hill and up in a most invigorating dash.

Such a ride cleared the cobwebs out of her head and revivified mind and body alike. At the end of this dash, when she halted the pony in an arroyo to breathe, she was cheerful and happy and ready to laugh at anything.

She laughed first at her own nose! It really was ridiculous to think that she smelled wood smoke.

But the pungent odor of burning wood grew more and more distinct. She gazed swiftly all around her, seeing no campfire, of course, in this shallow gulch. But suddenly she gathered up the bridle reins tightly and stared, wide-eyed, off to the left. A faint column of blue smoke rose into the air—she could not be mistaken.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish!" thought Ruth. "Another camping party? Who can be living so near Freezeout without giving us a call? The lone horseman? The Indian squaw? Or both?"

She half turned her pony to ride back. It might be some ill-disposed person camping here in secret. Flapjack and Min had intimated there were occasionally ne'er-do-wells found in the range—outlaws, or ill-disposed Indians.

Still, it was cowardly to run from the unknown. Ruth had tasted real peril on more than one occasion. She touched the spur to her pony instead of pulling him around, and rode on.

There was a curve in the arroyo and when she came into the hidden part of the basin the mystery was instantly explained. A fairly substantial cabin—recently built it was evident—stood near a thicket of mesquite. The door was hung on leather hinges and was wide open. Yet there must be some occupant, for the smoke rose through the hole in the roof. It struck Ruth, for several reasons, that the cabin had been built by an amateur.

She held in her pony again and might, after all, have wheeled him and ridden away without going closer, if the little beast had not betrayed her presence by a shrill whinny. Immediately the pony's challenge was answered from the mesquite where the unknown's horse was picketed.

Ruth was startled again. No sound came from

the cabin, nor could she discover anybody watching her from the jungle. She rode nearer to the cabin door.

It was then that the unshod hoofs of her pony announced her presence to whoever was within. A voice shouted suddenly:

"Hullo!"

The tone in which the word was uttered drove all the fear out of Ruth Fielding's mind. She knew that the owner of such a voice must be a gentleman.

She rode her pony up to the open door and peered into the dimly lighted interior. There was no window in the cabin walls.

"Hullo yourself!" she rejoined. "Are you all alone?"

"Sure I am. I'm a hermit—the Hermit Prospector. And I bet you are one of those moving picture girls."

A laugh accompanied the words. Ruth then saw the man, extended at full length in a rude bunk. One foot was bare and it and the ankle was swathed in bandages.

"Sorry I can't get up to do the honors. Doctor's ordered me to stay in bed till this ankle recovers."

"Oh! Is it broken?" cried Ruth, slipping out of her saddle and throwing the reins on the ground before the pony so that he would stand.

"Wrenched. But a bad one. I'm likely to stay here a while."

"And all alone?" breathed Ruth.

"Quite so. Not a soul to swear at, nor a cat to kick. My horse is out there in the mesquite and I suppose he's tangled up——"

"I'll fix that in a moment," cried Ruth. "He'd better be tethered here on the hillside before your door. The grazing is good."

"Well—yes. I suppose so."

Ruth was off into the mesquite in a flash. She found the whinnying pony. And she discovered another thing. The animal's lariat had been untangled and his grazing place changed several times.

"You've hobbled around a good bit since your ankle was hurt," she said accusingly, when she returned to the cabin door. "And see all the firewood you've got!"

"I expect I did too much after I strained the ankle," the man admitted gravely. "That's why it is so bad now. But when a man's alone——"

"Yes. When he *is* alone," repeated Ruth, eyeing him thoughtfully.

He was a young man and as roughly dressed as any of the teamsters at Freezeout Camp. There was, too, several days' growth of beard upon his face. But he was a good looking chap, with rather a humorous cast of countenance. And

Ruth was quite sure that he was educated and at present in a strange environment.

"Have you plenty of water?" she asked suddenly, for she had seen the spring several rods away.

"Lots," declared "the hermit." "See! I've a drip."

He pointed with pride to the arrangement of a rude shelf beside the head of his bunk with a twenty-quart galvanized pail upon it. A pin-hole had been punched in this pail near the bottom, and the water dripped from the aperture steadily into a pint cup on the floor.

"Would you believe it," he said, with a smile, "the water, after falling so far through the air, is quite cooled."

"What do you do when the pail is empty?" the girl asked quickly.

"Oh! I shall be able to hobble to the spring by that time. If the cup gets full and I don't need the water, I pour it back."

Ruth stood on tiptoe and looked into the pail. Then she brought water from the spring in her own canteen, making several trips, and filled the pail to the brim.

"Now, what do you eat, and how do you get it?" she asked him.

"My dear young lady!" he cried, "you must not worry about me. I shall be all right. I was just

going to cook some bacon when you rode up. That is why I made up a fresh fire. I shall be all right, I assure you."

Ruth insisted upon rumaging through his stores and cooking the hermit a hearty meal. She marked the fact that certain delicacies were here that the ordinary prospector would not have packed into the wilds. Likewise, there was vastly more tea and sugar than one person could use in a long time.

Ruth was quite sure "the hermit" was not a native of the West. She was exceedingly puzzled as she went about her kindly duties. Then, of a sudden, she was actually startled as well as puzzled. In a corner of the cabin she found hanging on a nail a rubber bathcap on which was stenciled "Ardmore." It was one of the gymnasium caps from her college.

CHAPTER XVIII

RUTH REALLY HAS A SECRET

RUTH FIELDING came back from her ride to Freezeout Camp and said not a word to a soul about her discovery of the young man in the cabin. She had a secret at last, but it was not her own. She did not feel that she had the right to speak even to Helen about it.

She was quite sure "the hermit" had no ill intention toward their party. And if he had a companion that companion could do those at Freezeout no harm.

Just what it was all about Ruth did not know; yet she had some suspicions. However, she rode out to the lone cabin the next day, and the next, to see that the young man was comfortable. "The Hermit Prospector," as he laughingly called himself, was doing very well.

Ruth brought him two slim poles out of the wood and he fashioned himself a pair of crutches. By means of these he began to hobble around and Ruth decided that he did not need her further min-

istrations. She did not tell him that she should cease calling, she merely ceased riding that way. For a "hermit" he had seemed very glad, indeed, to have somebody to speak to.

Ruth was exceedingly busy now. The director, Mr. Grimes—a very efficient but unpleasant man—arrived with the remainder of the company, and rehearsals began immediately. Hazel Gray, who had been so fresh and young looking when Ruth and Helen first met her at the Red Mill, was beginning to show the ravages of "film acting." The appealing personality which had first brought her into prominence in motion pictures was now a matter of "registering." There was little spontaneity in the leading lady's acting; but the part she had to play in "The Forty-Niners" was far different from that she had acted in "The Heart of a School Girl," an earlier play of Ruth's.

Mr. Grimes was just as unpleasantly sarcastic as when Ruth first saw him. But he got out of his people what was needed, although his shouting and threatening seemed to Ruth to be unnecessary.

With Ruth Mr. Grimes was perfectly polite. Perhaps he knew better than to be otherwise. He was good enough to commend the scenario, and although he changed several scenes she had spent hard work upon, Ruth was sensible enough to see that he changed them for good cause and usually for the better.

He approved of Min's part in the play, and he was careful with the Western girl in her scenes. Min did very well, indeed, and even Flapjack made his extra three dollars a day on several occasions when he appeared with the teamsters in the "rough house" scenes in the night life of the old-time mining camp.

The film actors were not an unpleasant company; yet after all they were not people who could adapt themselves to the rude surroundings of the abandoned camp as easily, even, as did the college girls. The women were always fussing about lack of hotel requisites—like baths and electric lights and maids to wait upon them. The men complained of the food and the rude sleeping accommodations.

Ruth learned something right here: All the girls from Ardmore save Rebecca Frayne and Ruth herself came from wealthy families—and Rebecca was used to every refinement of life. Yet the Ardmores took the "roughing it" good-naturedly and never worried their pretty heads about "maid service" and the like.

Some of the film women, seeing Min Peters about in her usual garb, undertook to treat her superciliously. They did not make the mistake twice. Min was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, and she intended to be treated with respect. Min was so treated.

Helen Cameron was much amused by the attitude her brother took toward the leading lady, Hazel Gray. Miss Gray was not more than two years older than the twins and when the film actress had first become known to them Tom had been instantly attracted. His case of boyish love had been acute, but brief.

For six months the walls of his study at Seven Oaks were fairly papered with pictures of Hazel Gray in all manner of poses and characterizations. The next semester Tom had gone in for well-known athletes, not excluding many prize fighters, and the pictures of Miss Gray went into the discard.

Now the young actress set out to charm Tom again. He was the only young personable male at Freezeout, save the actors themselves, and she knew them. But Tom gave her just as much attention as he did Min Peters, for instance, and no more.

There was but one girl in camp to whom he showed any special attention. He was always at Ruth's beck and call if she needed him. Tom never put himself forward with Ruth, or claimed more than was the due of any good friend. But the girl of the Red Mill often told herself that Tom was dependable.

She was not sure that she ever wanted her chum's brother to be anything more to her than

what he was now—a safe friend. She and Helen had talked so much about "independence" and the like that it seemed like sheer treachery to consider for a moment any different life after college than that they had planned.

Ruth was to write plays and sing. Helen was to improve her violin playing and give lessons. They would take a studio together in Boston—perhaps in New York—and live the ideal life of bachelor girls. Helen desired to support herself just as much as Ruth determined to support herself.

"It is dependence upon man for daily bread and butter that makes women slaves," Helen declared. And Ruth agreed—with some reservations. It began to look to her as though all were dependent upon one another in this world, irrespective of sex.

However, Tom was one of those dependable creatures that, if you wanted him, was right at hand. Ruth let the matter rest at that and did not disturb her mind much over questions of personal growth and expansion, or over the woman question.

Her thought, indeed, was so much taken up with the picture that was being made that she had little time to bother with anything else. She almost forgot the lame young man in the distant cabin and ceased to wonder as to who his companion might

be. She certainly had quite forgotten the specimens of ore which had been sent to the Handy Gulch assayer's office until unexpectedly the report arrived.

Helen and Jennie, as well as Peters and his daughter, were interested in this event. The others of the Ardmore party had only heard of the supposed find and had not even seen the uncovered bit of ledge from which the ore had been taken.

"Why, perhaps we are all rich!" breathed Jennie Stone. "Beyond the dreams of avarice! How much does he say?"

"One hundred and thirty-three dollars to the ton. And it's 'free gold,'" declared Ruth. "It can be extracted by the cyaniding process. That can be done on the spot, and cheaply. Where there is much sulphide in the ore the gold must be extracted by the hydro-electric process."

"Goodness, Ruth! How did you learn so much?" gasped Helen.

"By using my tongue and ears. What were they given us for?"

"To taste nice things with and drape 'spit-curls' over," giggled Jennie.

They went to Peters and Min and displayed the report. The old prospector could have given the thing away in the exuberance of his joy if it had not been for the good sense his daughter displayed.

"Hush up, Pop," she commanded. "You want to put all these bum actors on to the strike before we've laid out our own claims? We want to grab off the cream of this find. You know it must be rich."

"Rich? Say, girl, rich ain't no name for it. I know what this Freezeout proposition was when it was placer diggings. Where so much dust and nuggets come from along a crick bed, we knowed there must be a regular mother lode somewheres here. Only we never supposed it was on that side of the stream an' so far away. It looked like the old bed of the crick lay to the west.

"Well, we've got it! A hundred and thirty-three dollars per ton at the grass-roots. Lawsy! No knowin' how deep the ledge is. An' you ladies only took specimens in one spot. We want to take others clean acrosst the ledge—as far as we kin trace it—git 'em assayed, then pick out the best claims before any of these cheap skates around here can ring in on it. Laugh at *me,* will they? I reckon they'll find out that Flapjack is wuth something as a prospector after all."

He quite overlooked the fact that the three college girls had found the ore—and that somebody had uncovered the ledge before them! But Min did not forget these very pertinent facts.

"We got to get a hustle on us," she announced. "No knowin' who 'twas that first opened that

prospect, Pop. Mebbe he was green, or he ain't had his samples assayed yet. We got to get in quick."

"Sure," agreed Flapjack.

"And the best three claims has got to go to Miss Ruth and Miss Cam'ron and Miss Stone. They found the place. You an' I, Pop, 'll stake out the next best claims. Then the rush kin come. But we want to git more samples assayed first."

"Is that necessary?" Ruth asked, quite as eager as the others now. Somehow the gold-hunting fever gets into one's blood and effervesces. It was hard for any of them to keep their jubilation from the knowledge of the whole camp.

"We dunno how long this ledge of gold-bearing rock is," Min explained. "Maybe we only struck the poorest end of it. P'r'aps it'll run two hundred dollars or more to the ton at the other end. We want to stake off our claims where the ore is richest, don't we?"

"Let's stake it *all* off," said Helen.

"Couldn't hold it. Not by law. These big minin' companies git so many claims because they buy up options from different locaters all along a ledge. There's ha'f a hundred claims belongs to the Arepo Company, for instance, at one workin's. No. We've got to be careful and keep this secret till we're sure where the best of the ore lays."

"Oh, let's go at once and see!" cried Jennie.

"We'll go this afternoon," Ruth said. "All five of us."

"I hope nobody will find the place before we get there," Helen observed.

"No more likely now than 'twas before," Min said sensibly. "Pop'll sneak out a pick and shovel for us, and meet us over there on the ridge."

So it was arranged. But the three college girls were so excited that they were scarcely fit for either work or play. They set off eagerly into the hills after lunch and met Flapjack and his daughter as had been appointed.

CHAPTER XIX

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

THE old prospector was wild with joy. He had already dug several holes down to the surface of the ledge along the ridge north of the spot where the first sample of gold-bearing rock had been secured. He claimed that each spot showed an increase in the amount of gold in the rock.

"It's ha'f a mile long, I bet. An' the farther you go, the richer it gits. I tell you, we're goin' all to be as rich as red mud! Whoop!"

"Hold in your hosses, Pop," commanded Min, sensibly. "Them folks down in camp may see you prancin' around here, and they'll either think you are crazy or know that you've struck pay dirt. And we don't want 'em in on this yet."

"By mighty! Listen here, girl!" gasped the old man. "We're goin' to be rich, you and me. You're goin' to dress in the fanciest clo'es there is. You'll look a lot finer than that there leadin' lady actress girl. Believe me!"

"Now, Pop, be sensible!"

"You're a-goin' to be a lady," declared Flapjack.

"Huh! Me, a lady, with them han's?" and she put forth both her calloused palms. "A fat chance I got!"

With tears in her eyes Ruth Fielding said: "Those hands have earned the right to be a 'lady's', Min. If there is gold here in quantity, you shall be all that your father says."

"Of course she shall!" cried the other college girls in chorus.

"Well, it'll kill me, I know that," declared Min. "I'd just about bust wide open with joy."

Flapjack dug seven holes that afternoon, and they took seven specimens of the rock with the bright specks in it. The college girls thought they could detect an increasing amount of gold in the ore as they advanced up the ledge.

The old prospector insisted upon filling in each hole as they went along and putting back the tufts of bunch grass in order to make the place look as it ordinarily did. Tiny numbered stakes driven down into the loose and gravelly soil was all that marked the places from which the specimens were taken. Of course, the specimens themselves were properly marked, too.

The gold seemed to be right at the grass roots, as Flapjack had said. He told them the ledge was all of twenty yards wide, with the width increas-

ing as the value of the ore increased. The full length of the ledge was still unexplored, but the depth of the vein of gold-bearing quartz was really the "unknown dimension."

"But we're going to be rich, girls!" whispered Jennie Stone, almost dancing, as they went back to the camp at dusk. "Rich! why, I've always been rich—or, my father has. I never thought much about it. But to own a real gold mine oneself!"

The thought was too great for utterance. Besides, they had agreed not to whisper about the find at the camp. Not even Miss Cullam knew that the report had come from the assayer regarding the first specimen of ore the girls had found.

It was not hard to hide their excitement, for there was so much going on at Freezeout Camp. Mr. Grimes was trying to rush the work as much as possible, for the picture actors were complaining constantly regarding their trials and the manifold privations of the situation.

The college girls and Ann Hicks, however, were having the time of their lives. They dressed up in astonishing apparel furnished by the film company and posed as the female populace of Freezeout Camp in some of the episodes. Min, in the part Ruth had especially written for her, was a pronounced success. Miss Gray, of course, as she always did, filled the character of the heroine

"to the queen's taste"—and to Mr. Grimes' satisfaction as well, which was of much more importance.

The weather was just the kind the "sun worshipers" delighted in. The camera man could grind his machine for six hours a day or more. The film of "The Forty-Niners" grew steadily.

Ruth had practically finished her part of the work; but Rebecca Frayne was kept busy at her typewriter during part of the day. Therefore, Ruth easily got away from the sanctum sanctorum the next forenoon and went up to the ridge again with Flapjack and Min.

It had been settled that Helen and Jennie should remain with the other girls and keep them from wandering about on the easterly side of the stream.

Flapjack had been on the ridge since early light. He was taking samples every few rods, and Min was wrapping them up and marking the ore and the stakes. Beyond a small grove of scrubby trees they came in sight of what Flapjack declared was probably the end of the gold-bearing rock. There was a dip into another arroyo and beyond that a mesquite jungle as far as they could see.

"Well, she's more'n a ha'f a mile long," sighed the old prospector. "Ev'ry thing's got to come to an end in this world they say. We needn't grow bristles about it—— Great cats! what's them?"

"Oh, Pop!" shrieked Min, "we ain't here first."

"What *are* those stakes?" asked Ruth, puzzled to see that the peeled posts planted in the gravelly soil should so disturb the equanimity of the prospector and his daughter.

"Somebody's ahead of us. Two claims staked," groaned Flapjack. "And layin' over the best streak of ore in the whole ledge, I bet my hat!"

There were two scraps of paper on the posts. Min ran forward to read the names upon them. Flapjack rested on his pick and said no further word.

Of a sudden Ruth heard the sharp ring of a pony's hoof on gravel. She turned swiftly to see the pony pressing through the mesquite at the foot of the ridge. Its rider urged the animal up the slope and in a moment was beside them.

"What are you doing on my claim and my partner's?" the man demanded, and he slid out of his saddle gingerly, slipping rude crutches under his armpits as he came to the ground. He had one foot bandaged, and hobbled toward Ruth and her companions with rather a truculent air.

"What are you doing on my claim?" "the hermit" repeated, and he was glaring so intently at Flapjack that he did not see Ruth at all.

The prospector was smoking his pipe, and he nearly dropped it as he stared in turn at this odd-looking figure on crutches. It was easy enough to

see that the claimant to the best options on Freeze-out ledge was a tenderfoot.

"Ain't on your claim," growled Peters at last.

"Well, that other fellow is," declared "the hermit," "Let me tell you that my partner's gone to Kingman to have the claims recorded. They are so by this time. If you try to jump 'em——"

"Who's tryin' to jump anything?" demanded Min, now coming back from examining the notices on the stakes. "Which are you—this here 'E' or 'R'yal?' "

"Royal is my name," said the man, gruffly.

"Brothers, I s'pose?" said Min.

The young man stared at her wonderingly. "I declare!" he finally exclaimed. "You're a girl, aren't you?"

"No matter who or what I am," said Min Peters, tartly. "You needn't think you can stake out all this ledge just because you found it first—maybe."

It was evident that both Flapjack and his daughter considered the appearance of this claimant to the supposedly richest options on the ledge most unfortunate.

" I know my rights and the law," said the young man quite as truculently as before. "If it's necessary I'll stay here and watch those stakes till my —my partner gets back with the men and machinery that are hired to open up these claims."

"By mighty!" groaned Flapjack. "The hull thing will be spread through Arizony in the shake of a sheep's hind laig."

"Well, what of it? You can stake out claims as we did," snapped "the hermit." "We are not trying to hog it all."

"These men you're bringin' 'll grab off the best options and sell 'em to you. You're Easterners. You're goin' to make a showin' and then sell the mine to suckers," said Min bitterly. "We know all about your kind, don't we, Pop?"

Peters muttered his agreement. Ruth considered that it was now time for her to say another word.

"I am sure," she began, "that Mr.—er—Royal will only do what is fair. And, of course, we want no more than our rights."

The man with the injured ankle looked at her curiously. "I'm willing to believe what you say," he observed. "You have already been kind to me. Though you didn't come back to see me again. But I don't know anything about this man and this —er——"

"Miss Peters and her father," introduced Ruth, briskly, as she saw Min flushing hotly. "And they must stake off their claims next in running to the two you and your partner have staked."

"No!" exclaimed Min, fiercely. "You and the other two young ladies come first. Then pop and

me. It puts us a good ways down the ledge; but it's only fair."

The young man looked much worried. He said suddenly:

"How many more of you are informed of the existence of this gold ledge?"

"After my claim," said Ruth, firmly, "I am going to stake out one for Rebecca Frayne. She needs money more than anybody else in our party —more even than Miss Cullam. The others can come along as they chance to."

"Great Heavens!" gasped the young man. "How many more of you are there? I say! I'll make you an offer. What'll you all take for your claims, sight-unseen?"

"There! What did I tell you?" grumbled Min Peters. "He's one o' them Eastern promoters that allus want to skim the cream of ev'rything."

CHAPTER XX

THE MAD STALLION

SOMEHOW Ruth Fielding could not find herself subscribing to this opinion of "the hermit" so flatly stated by Min Peters. She begged the prospector's daughter to hush.

"Let us not say anything to each other that we will later be sorry for. Of course, we all understand—and must admit—that the finding of this gold-bearing ledge is a matter that cannot be long kept from the general public."

"Sure! There'll be a rush," growled Flapjack.

"And when this feller's men git here they'll hog it all," declared Min.

"They won't hog our claims—not unless I'm dead," said her father violently.

"Oh, hush! hush!" cried Ruth again. "This is no way to talk. We can stake out our claims and the other girls can stake out theirs. You understand we honestly found this ore just the same as you and your partner did?" she added to the lame young man.

"I found it first," he said, gloomily. "I found it months ago——"

"Great cats!" broke in Flapjack. "Why didn't you file on it, then, and git started?"

"Yes, Mr. Royal," said Ruth, puzzled. "Why the delay?"

"Well, you see, I hadn't any money. I had to write to—to my partner. Ahem! I had to get money through my partner. I was afraid to file on the claim for fear the news would spread and the whole ridge be overrun with prospectors before I could be sure of mine."

"And what you considered yours was the cream of it all," repeated Min, quickly.

"Well! I found it, didn't I?" he demanded.

"We were going to do the same thing ourselves," Ruth said. "Let us be fair, Min."

"But this feller means to git it all," snapped the prospector's daughter, nodding at "the hermit."

"It means a lot to me—this business," the young man muttered. "More than I can tell you. *It means everything to me.*"

He spoke so earnestly that the trio felt uncomfortable. Even Min did not seem able to ask another personal question. Her father drawled:

"Seems to me I seen you 'round Yucca, didn't I, Mister?"

"Yes. I stayed there for a while. With a man named Braun."

"Yep. Out on the trail to Kaster."

"Yes," said "the hermit."

"Oh!" ejaculated Ruth, suddenly. "Was his rural delivery box number twenty-four?"

"What?" asked "the hermit." "Yes, it was."

Ruth opened her lips again; then she shut them tightly. She would not speak further of this subject before Flapjack and Min.

"Well," the latter said irritably. "No use standin' here all day. We're goin' to stake out them claims and put up notices. And we don't want 'em teched, neither."

"If mine are not touched you may be sure I shall not interfere with yours," said the young man stiffly, turning his back on them and hobbling to his waiting pony.

Ruth wanted to say something else to him; then she hesitated. Then the young man rode away, the crutches dangling over his shoulder by a cord.

She left Peters and Min to stake out the claims, having written the notices for her own, and for Helen's and Jennie's and Rebecca Frayne's claims as well. It was agreed that nothing was to be said at the camp about the find. As soon as she arrived she took Helen and Jennie aside and warned them.

"As Min says, we'll 'button up our lips,' " Jennie said. "Oh, I can keep a secret! But who will go to Kingman to file on the claims?"

That was what was puzzling Ruth. Flapjack,

who knew all about such things—and knew the shortest trail, of course—was not to be trusted. He had money in his pocket and as Min said, a little money drove the man to drink.

"And Min can't go. She is needed in several further scenes of the picture," groaned Ruth.

"I tell you what," Helen said eagerly, "we have just got to take one other person into our confidence."

"You are right," agreed Ruth. "I know whom you mean, Nell. Tom, of course."

"Yes, Tom is perfectly safe," said Helen. "He won't even go up there and stake out a claim for himself if I tell him not to. But he *will* rush to Kingman and file on our claims."

"And take these specimens of ore to the assayer," put in Ruth.

It was so agreed, and when Min and her father reappeared at the camp the suggestion was made to them. Evidently the Western girl had been much puzzled about this very thing and she hailed the suggestion with acclaim.

"Seems to me I ought to be the one to file on them claims," Flapjack said slowly. "And takin' one more into this thing means spreadin' it out thinner."

"I wouldn't trust you to go to Kingman with money in your pocket," declared his daughter frankly. "You know, Pop, you said long ago that

if ever you did strike it rich you was goin' to be a gentleman and cut out all the rough stuff."

"That's right," admitted Mr. Peters. "Me for a plug hat and a white vest with a gold watchchain across it, and a good *see*gar in my mouth. Yes, sir! That's me. And a feller can't afford to git 'toxicated and roll 'round the streets with them sort of duds on—no sir! If this is my lucky strike I've sure got to live up to it."

Ruth wondered if clothes were going to make such a vast difference to both Min and her father. Yet lesser things than clothes have been elements of regeneration in human lives.

However, it was agreed that Tom must be taken into the gold hunters' confidence. He was certainly surprised and wanted to rush right over to look at the ridge. But they showed him the gold-bearing ore instead and he had to be satisfied with that.

For time was pressing. "The hermit's" partner might return with a crowd of hired workers and trouble might ensue. Without doubt Royal and his mate had intended to open the entire length of the ledge and gain possession of it. The mining law made it imperative that the claims should be of a certain area and each claim must be worked within so many months. But there are ways of circumventing the law in Arizona as well as in other places.

"I wonder who that partner of the lame fellow is?" Ruth murmured, as they were talking it over while Tom Cameron was making his preparations for departure.

"Same name as R'yal," said Min, briefly. "Must be brothers."

This statement rather puzzled Ruth. It certainly dissipated certain suspicions she had gained from her visits to the cabin in the distant arroyo, where "the hermit" lived.

Tom left the camp before night, carrying a good map of the trails to the north as far as Kingman. He was supposed to be going on some private errand for himself, and as he had no connection at all with the moving picture activities his departure was scarcely noted.

Besides, Mr. Grimes and the actors were just then preparing for one of the biggest scenes to be incorporated in the film of "The Forty-Niners." This was the hold-up of the wagon train by Indians and it was staged on the old trail leading south out of Freezeout.

The wagons that had carted the paraphernalia over from Yucca had tops just like the old emigrant wagons in '49. There were only a few real Indians in Mr. Grimes' company; but some of the cowboys dressed in Indian war-dress. For picture purposes there seemed a crowd of them when the action took place.

Everybody went out to see the film taken, and the fight and massacre of the gold hunters seemed very realistic. Indeed, one part of it came near to being altogether too realistic.

One of the punchers working with the company had announced before that there was either a bunch of wild horses in the vicinity, or a lone stallion strayed from some ranch. The horse in question had been sighted several times, and its hoofprints were often seen within half a mile of Freezeout.

The girls, while riding in a party through the hills, had spied the black and white creature, standing on a pinnacle and gazing, snorting, down upon the bridled ponies. The lone horse seemed to be attracted by those of his breed, yet feared to approach them while under the saddle. And, of course, the horses of the outfit were all picketed near the camp.

In the midst of the rehearsal of the Indian hold-up, when the emigrant's ponies were stampeded by the redskins, the lone horse appeared and, snorting and squealing, tried to join the herd of tame horses and lead them away.

"It's an 'old rogue' stallion, that's what it is," Ben Lester, one of the real Indians remarked. He had been to Harvard and had come back to his family in Arizona to straighten out business affairs, and was waiting for the Government to un-

tangle much red tape before getting his share of the Southern Ute grant.

"He acts like he was locoed to me," declared Felix Burns, the horse wrangler, who, much to his disgust, had to "act in them fool pitchers" as well as handle the stock for the outfit. "Looky there! If he comes for you, beat him off with your quirts. A bite from him might send man or beast jest as crazy as a mad dog."

"Do you mean that the stallion is really mad?" asked Ruth, who was riding near the Indians, but, of course, out of the focus of the camera.

"Just as mad as a dog with hydrophobia—and just as dangerous," declared Ben. "You ladies keep back. We may have to beat the brute off. He's a pretty bird, but if he's locoed, he'd better be dead than afoot—poor creature."

The strangely acting stallion did not come near enough, however, for the boys to use their quirts. Nor did he bite any of the loose horses. He seemed to have an idea of leading the pack astray, that was all; and when the ponies were rounded up the stallion disappeared again, whistling shrilly, over the nearest ridge.

CHAPTER XXI

A PERIL OF THE SADDLE

HELEN and Jennie, as they had promised, kept away from the ridge where the gold-bearing rock had been found. But the next afternoon when Ruth went for a gallop over the hills she chose a direction that would bring her around to the rear of the ledge.

She left her pony and climbed the hill on foot. For some distance along the length of the ledge and toward what was believed to be the richer end, Flapjack and Min had staked out the claims. They followed the two staked by the lame young man and his partner, and "R. Fielding" was on the notice stuck up on the one next to the claims of the mysterious young man and his partner.

"Well, nobody's disturbed them, that is sure. Tom is pounding away just as fast as he can go for Kingman. Dates and time mean much in establishing mining claims, I believe. But if Tom gets to the county office and files on these claims before this other party can get on the site to jump

them—if that is what they really mean to do—in the end we ought to be able to get judgment in the courts."

Yet, somehow, she could not believe that "the hermit" was the sort of man who would do anything crooked. Satisfied that none of the stakes had been disturbed she returned to her pony and started him into the east again.

In a few moments she found herself following that half-defined path that she had ridden on the day she had first seen the secret cabin and the lame man in it. She had never mentioned this adventure to any of the girls. Ruth was, by nature, cautious without being really secretive. And when a second person was a party to any secret she was not the girl to chatter.

She hesitated, if the pony did not, in following this route. Half a dozen times she might have pulled out and taken a side turn, or ridden into another arroyo and so escaped seeing that hidden cabin again.

It must be confessed, however, that Ruth Fielding was curious. Very curious indeed. And she had reason to be. The gymnasium cap she had seen in "the hermit's" cabin pointed to a most astounding possibility. She had not believed in the first place that "the hermit" was entirely alone in this wild and lonely spot. Now he had admitted the existence of a partner. Who was it?"

She was deep in thought as her pony carried her at an easy canter down into the arroyo at the far end of which the cabin stood. Suddenly her mount lifted his head and challenged.

"Whoa! what's the matter with you? What are you squealing at?" demanded Ruth, tightening her grasp on the reins.

She glanced around and saw nothing at first. Then the pony squealed again, and as it did so there came an answering equine hail from the mesquite. There was a crash in the bushes; then out upon the open ground charged the lone stallion that had the day before troubled the picture making company.

There was good blood in the handsome brute. He was several hands higher than the cow pony, and his legs were as slender and shapely as a Morgan's. His muzzle was as glossy as satin; his nostrils a deep red and he blew through them and expanded them with ears pricked forward and yellow teeth bared—making altogether a striking picture, but one that Ruth Fielding would much rather have seen on the screen than here in reality.

She raised her quirt and brought it down upon her pony's flank. He sprang forward under the lash but was not quick enough to escape the mad stallion. That brute got directly in the path and they collided.

Ruth was almost unseated, while the clashing teeth of the free horse barely grazed her legging. He snapped again at the rump of the plunging pony, but missed.

The girl was seriously frightened. What Ben Lester and the other cowpuncher had said about the stallion seemed to be true. Did he have hydrophobia just the same as a dog that runs mad?

Whether the beast was afflicted with the rabies or not, Ruth did not want either herself or the pony bitten. She had seen enough of half-tamed horses on Silver Ranch in Montana to know that there is scarcely an animal more savage than a wild stallion.

And if this black and white beast had eaten of the loco weed which, in some sections of the Southwest is quite common, he was much more dangerous than the bear Min Peters had shot as they came over from Yucca.

She tried to start her pony along the bottom of the arroyo on the back track; but the squealing stallion had got around behind them and again charged with open jaws, the froth flying from his curled-back lips.

So she wheeled her mount, clinging desperately with her knees to his heaving sides, and once more lashed him with the quirt.

Since she had ridden him that first day out of Yucca Ruth had been in the saddle almost every

day since; but so far she had never had occasion to use the whip on her pony. He was a spirited bit of horseflesh, not much more than half the size of the stallion. The quirt embittered him.

Although he wheeled to run, facing down the arroyo again, he began to buck instead. His heels suddenly were thrown out and just grazed the stallion's nose, while Ruth came close to flying out of her saddle and over his head.

If she was once unhorsed Ruth suddenly realized that her fate would be sealed. The stallion rose up on his hind legs, squealing and whistling, and struck at her with his sharp hoofs.

It was a moment of grave peril for Ruth Fielding.

Again and again she beat her mount, and again and again he went up into the air, landing stiff-legged, and with all four feet close together. Then she swung the stinging lash across the face of the stallion.

It was a cruel blow and it laid open the satiny, black skin of the angry brute right across his nose. He squealed and fell back. The pony whirled and again Ruth struck at their common enemy.

Lashing the stallion seemed a better thing than punishing her own frightened mount, and as the mad horse circled her the girl struck again and again, once cutting open the stallion's shoulder and drawing blood in profusion.

The fight was not won so easily, however. The pony danced around and around trying to keep his heels to the stallion; the latter endeavored to get in near enough to use either his fore-hoofs in striking, or his teeth to tear the girl or her mount.

And then Ruth unexpectedly heard a shout. Somebody at the top of his voice ordered her to "Lie down on his neck—I'm going to fire!"

She saw nothing; she had no idea where this prospective rescuer stood; but she was wise enough to obey. She seized the pony's mane and lay as close to his neck as possible. The next instant the report of a heavy rifle drowned even the squealing of the stallion.

He had risen on his hind feet, his fore-hoofs beating the air, the foam flying from his lips, his yellow teeth gleaming. A more frightful, threatening figure could scarcely be imagined it seemed to the girl of the Red Mill in her dire peril.

At the rifle shot he toppled over backward, crashing to the earth with a scream that was almost human. There he lay on his back for a minute.

Out of the brush hobbled the young man named Royal. He was getting around without his crutches now. The gun in his hand was still smoking.

"Have you a rope?" he shouted. "If you have I'll noose him."

"No. I haven't a rope, though Ann is always telling me never to ride without one in this country."

"I think she's right—whoever Ann is," said the young man, with that humorous twist to his features that Ruth so liked. "A rope out here is handier than a little red wagon. Come on, quick! I only creased that stallion. He may not have had the fight all taken out of him—the ferocious beast!"

The black and white horse was already trying to struggle to his feet. Perhaps he was not badly hurt. Ruth controlled her pony, and he was headed down the arroyo.

"Where is your horse, Mr. Royal?" she asked the lame young man.

He started and looked a little oddly at her when she called him that; but he replied:

"My horse is down at the cabin. I was just trying my legs a little. Glory! I almost turned my ankle again that time."

He was hobbling pretty badly now, for he had been too excited while shooting the mad stallion to be careful of his lame ankle. Ruth was out of the saddle in a moment.

"Get right up here," she commanded. "We'll get to your cabin and be safe. I can go back to camp by another way."

"Not alone," he declared, firmly, as he

scrambled into her place on the pony. "I'll ride with you. That beast is not done for yet."

But the stallion did not pursue them. He stood rather wabblingly and shook his head, and turned in slow circles as though he were dazed. The rifle shot had not, however, permanently injured him.

They were quickly out of the sight of the scene of Ruth's peril. The young man looked down at her, trudging hot and dusty beside the pony, and his face crinkled into a broad smile again.

"You're some girl," he said. "I'd dearly love to know your name and just who you are. My—That is, my partner says you are a bunch of movie actors over there at Freezeout. But, of course, that old-timer who was up on the ridge and the girl in—er—overalls, were not actors. How about you?"

"Yes," said Ruth, amusedly. "I act. Sometimes."

"Get out!"

"I did. Out of my saddle to give you my seat. You should be more polite."

He burst into open laughter at this. "You're all right," he declared. "Do you mind telling me your name?"

"Fielding. Miss Fielding, Mr. Royal."

He grinned at her wickedly. "You've got only half of *my* name," he said.

"Indeed?" she cried. "Yes, I suppose, like

other people, you must have a first name."

"I have a last name," he chuckled.

"What?" Ruth gasped. "Isn't Royal——"

"That is what I was christened. Phelps is the rest of it—Royal Phelps."

"I knew it! I felt it!" declared Ruth, stopping in the trail and making the pony stop, too. "You are Edith Phelps' brother. I was puzzled as I could be, for I believed, since the first day I met you, that must be so and that she had been with you at that cabin."

"Why," he asked curiously, "how did you come to know my sister?"

"Go to college with her," said Ruth, shortly, and moving on again. "And she was on the train with us coming West."

"And you did not know where she was coming? Of course not! It was a secret."

"She knew where *we* were coming," said Ruth, briefly.

"Then you're not a movie actress?"

"I'm a freshman at Ardmore. But I do act—once in a while. There are a party of us girls from Ardmore, with one of the teachers, roughing it at Freezeout Camp. The movie people are there, too. We are acquainted with them."

"Well, I'm mighty sorry my sister isn't here——"

"Is she your partner, Mr. Phelps?" Ruth asked.

"Sure thing! And a bully good one. When I was hurt and couldn't ride so far, she set off alone to find her way over the trails to Kingman."

"Oh!" Ruth cried. "Aren't you worried about her? Have you heard——?"

"Not a word. But it isn't time yet. Edith is a smart girl," declared the brother with confidence. "She'll make it all right. I don't expect her back for a week yet."

"Oh! but we expect Tom——"

"What Tom?" asked Phelps, suspiciously.

"My chum's brother. He started—started day before yesterday—for Kingman to file on our claims. We expect him back in ten days, or two weeks at the longest. Why, we shall probably be all through taking the pictures by that time!"

"Look here, Miss Fielding," said the young man, his face suddenly gloomy. "Can't you fix it so we can buy up your claims along that ridge? It means a lot to me."

"Why, Mr. Phelps!" exclaimed Ruth, "don't you suppose it means something to the rest of us? If it is really a valuable gold deposit."

"Not what it means to me," he returned soberly, and rode in silence the rest of the way to the cabin.

CHAPTER XXII

RUTH HEARS SOMETHING

RUTH FIELDING was particularly interested in the situation of "the hermit," Edith Phelps' brother. But she was not deeply enough interested in him or in his desires to give up her own expectation from the gold-bearing ledge on the ridge.

She remembered very clearly what Helen Cameron had told her about this young Royal Phelps. She had not known his name, of course, and the fact that Min Peters that day on the ridge had not explained fully what Royal's last name was, had caused the girl some further puzzlement.

The character the tale about Edith's brother had given that young man did not seem to fit this "hermit" either. This fellow seemed so gentlemanly and so amusing, that she could scarcely believe him the worthless character he was pictured. Yet, his presence here in the wilds, and Edith's coming out to him so secretly, pointed to a mystery that teased the girl of the Red Mill.

When they came to the cabin door, and Royal Phelps slid carefully out of her saddle, Ruth said easily:

"I wish you'd tell me all about yourself, Mr. Phelps. I am curious—and frank to say so."

"I don't blame you," he admitted, smiling suddenly again—and Ruth thought that smile the most disarming she had ever seen. Royal Phelps might have been disgraced at college, but she believed it must have been through his fun-loving disposition rather than because of any viciousness.

"I don't blame you for feeling curiosity," the young man repeated, seating himself gingerly in the doorway. "If I had a chair I'd offer it to you, Miss Fielding."

"Thanks. I'll hop on my pony. I'll get yours for you before I go."

"Wait a bit," he urged. "I am going with you when you return to that town. That wild beast of a horse may be rampaging around again."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Ruth with no feigned shudder. "He was awful!"

"Now you've said something! But you are a mighty cool girl, Miss Fielding. What Edie would have done——"

"She would have done quite as well as I, I have no doubt," Ruth hastened to say. "And I have been in the West before, Mr. Phelps."

"Yes? You are really a movie actor?"

"Sometimes."

"And a college girl?"

"Always!" laughed his visitor.

"I believe you are puzzling me intentionally."

"I told you that I was puzzled about you."

"I suppose so," he laughed. "Well, tit for tat. You tell me and I'll tell you."

"I trust to your honor," she said, with mock seriousness. "I will tell you my secret. Really, I am not a movie actress—save by brevet."

"I thought not!" he exclaimed with warmth.

"Why, they are very nice folk!" Ruth told him. "Much nicer than you suppose. I am really writing the scenario Mr. Hammond is producing."

"Goodness!" he exclaimed. "A literary person?"

"Exactly."

"But why didn't Edie tell me something about you? She went over there and took a peep at you."

"I fancied so. The girls thought her an Indian squaw. That would please Edie—if I know her at all," said Ruth with sarcasm.

"I'll have to tell her," he grinned.

"Better not. She does not like us any too well. Us freshmen, I mean. You know," Ruth decided to explain, "there is an insurmountable wall between freshmen and sophs."

"I ought to know," murmured Royal Phelps, and his face clouded.

Ruth, determined to get to the root of this mysterious matter, thrust in a deep probe: "I believe you have been to college, Mr. Phelps?"

He reddened to his ears. "Oh, yes," he answered shortly.

"And then did you come out here to go into the mining business?" she continued, with some cruelty, for he was writhing.

"After the pater put me out—yes," he said, looking directly at her now, even though his face flamed.

Ruth was doubly assured that Royal Phelps could not be as black as he was painted. "Though I do not believe any painter could reflect the Italian sunset hue that now mantles his brow," she thought.

"I am sorry that you have had trouble with your father. Is it insurmountable?" she asked him quietly, and with the air that always gave even strangers confidence in Ruth Fielding.

"I hope not," he admitted. "I was mad enough when I came away. I just wanted to 'show him.' But now I'd like to *show him.* Do—do you get me?"

"There is no difference in the words, but a great deal in the inflection, Mr. Phelps," Ruth said quietly.

"Well. You're an understandable girl. After I had come a cropper at Harvard—silly thing, too, but made the whole faculty wild," and here he grinned like a naughty small boy at the remembrance—"the pater said I wasn't worth the powder to blow me to Halifax. And I guess he was right. But he'd not given me a chance.

"Said I'd never done a lick of work and probably wouldn't. Said I was cut out for a rich man's wastrel or a tramp. Said I shouldn't be the first with *his* money. Told Jeames to show me the outer portal with the brass plate on it, and bring in the 'welcome' mat so that I wouldn't stand there and think it meant *me*.

"So I came away from there," finished Royal Phelps with a wry face.

"Oh, that was terrible!" Ruth declared with clasped hands and all the sympathy that the most exacting prodigal could expect. "But, of course, he didn't mean it."

"Mean it? You don't know Costigan Phelps. He never says anything he doesn't mean. Let me tell you it won't be a slippery day when *I* show up at the paternal mansion. The pater certainly will not run out and fall on either my neck or his own. There'll be nobody at the home plate to see me coming and hail me: 'Kill the fatted prodigal; here comes the calf!' Believe me!"

"Oh, Mr. Phelps!" begged Ruth. "Don't talk

that way. I know just how you feel. And you are trying to hide it——"

"With airy persiflage—yes," he admitted, turning serious. "Well, pater's made a lot of money in mines. I said to Edie: 'I'll shoot for the West and locate a few and so attract his attention to the Young Napoleon of mines in his own field.' It looked easy."

"Of course," whispered Ruth.

"But it wasn't."

"Of course again," and the girl smiled.

"Grin away. It helps *you* to bear it," scoffed Royal Phelps. "But it doesn't help the 'down and outer' a bit to grin. I know. I've tried it ever since last fall."

"Oh!"

"I finally got to rummaging out through these hills. I came with a party of sheep herders. You know the Prodigal Son only herded hogs. *That's* an aristocratic game out here in the West beside sheep herding. Believe me!

"It puts a man in the last row when he fools with sheep. When I went down to Yucca nobody would have anything to do with me but old Braun. And he was owning sheep right then.

"If I went into a place the fellows would hold their noses and tiptoe out. You know, it's a joke out here: A couple of fellows made a bet as to which was the most odoriferous—a sheep or a

Greaser. So they put up the money and selected a judge.

"They brought the sheep into the judge's cabin and the judge fainted. Then they brought in the Greaser and the sheep fainted. So, you see, aside from Greasers, I didn't have many what you'd call close friends."

Ruth's lips formed the words "Poor boy!" but she would not have given voice to them for the world. Still, for some reason, Royal Phelps, who was looking directly at her, nodded his head gratefully.

"Tough times, eh? Well, I'd seen something up here in these hills. I'd been studying about mineral deposits—especially gold signs. I saved enough money to get a small outfit and this pony I ride. I'd brought my gun on from the East. I started out prospecting with scarcely a grubstake. But nobody around here would have trusted a tenderfoot like me. I was bound to do it on my lonely, if I did it at all."

"Weren't you afraid to start off alone?" asked Ruth. "Mr. Peters says it is dangerous for *one* to go prospecting."

"Yes. But lots of the old-timers do. And this 'new-timer' did it. Nothing bit me," he added dryly.

"So I came back here and knocked up this cabin. Pretty good for 'mamma's baby boy,' isn't

it?" and he laughed shortly. "That's what some of the Lazy C punchers called me when I first came into their neighborhood.

"Well, mamma's boy played a lone hand and found that ledge of gold ore. For it *is* gold I know. I had some specimens assayed."

"So did we," confessed Ruth, eagerly.

He scowled again. "You girls—movie actresses, college girls, or whoever you are—are likely to queer this whole business for me. Say!" he added, "that one in the overalls isn't an Ardmore freshman, is she?"

"Hardly," laughed Ruth. "But she needs a gold mine a good deal more than the rest of us do."

CHAPTER XXIII

MORE OF IT

ROYAL PHELPS continued very grave and silent for a few moments after Ruth's last statement. Then he groaned.

"Well, it can't be helped! None of you can want that ledge of gold more than I do. That I know. But, of course, your claims are perfectly legitimate. It is a fact the men Edith will bring out with her are under contract. I sent her to a lawyer in Kingman who understands such things. An agreement with the men covers all the claims they may stake out on this certain ledge—dimensions in contract, and all that. I wanted to start the work, make a showing with reports of assayers and all, then send it to a friend of mine in New York who graduated from college last year and went into his father's brokerage shop, and he would put shares in my mine on the market. With the money, I hoped to develop and—Well! what's the use of talking about it? We'll get our little slice and that is all, if you girls and the other folks

that have staked claims hang on to your ownings."

"Tell me how you came to get Edith into it?" asked Ruth without commenting upon his statement.

"Why, she's a good old sport, Edie is," declared the brother warmly. "She stood up to the pater for me. She can do most anything with him. But I've got to do something before he lets down the bars to me, even for her sake.

"We kept in correspondence, Edie and I, all through the winter. When I found this gold I wrote her hotfoot. I did not dare file my claim. It would cause comment and perhaps start a rush this way."

"I see."

"And you can easily understand," he chuckled, "how startled Edie was when, as she told me, she learned that several girls she knew were coming out here to old Freezeout to work with some movie people. Of course, she did not tell me just who you were, Miss Fielding."

"I suppose not."

"No. Well, she was suspicious of you, she said. Wanted to know just when you were coming and how. She desired to get to Yucca as soon as possible, but she had to spend some time with the pater. Poor old chap! he thinks the world and all of her—in his way.

"Well, she had to do some shopping in New

York, and went to a friend's house. The chauffeur who drove them around was a decent fellow and she told him to keep a watch on the Delophion for you folks. You went there, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Ruth, remembering Tom's story.

"So did she—for one night. She took the same train you did and an accident gave her some advantage. I don't think she was nice to that friend of yours that she made tag on with her as far as Handy, where I met her," added Royal Phelps, slowly.

"Oh!" was Ruth's dry comment.

"But she was mighty secretive, you know," apologized the young man. "You see, we really had to be."

"I suppose so."

"Well, that's about all. Edie brought the money. She has some of her own and the pater gave her five thousand without asking a question. She and I are really partners. We're going to show him—if we can."

"I think it is fine of you, Mr. Phelps!" cried Ruth, with enthusiasm. "And—and I think your sister is a sister worth having."

"Oh, you can bet she is!" he agreed. "Edie is all right. I couldn't begin to pull this off if it were not for her. I expect the pater will say so in the end. But if I can show some money for

what I have done—a bunch of it—it will be all right with him."

Ruth made no further comment here. She saw plainly that Royal Phelps' father probably weighed everybody and everything on the same scales upon which precious metals are weighed.

"Now I'll catch your pony, Mr. Phelps," she said. "If you want to ride back with me I'll introduce you to the girls and Miss Cullam."

"That's nice of you. Perfectly bully, you know. Or, as they say out here, 'skookum!' But I guess I'd better wait till Edie returns. Let her do the honors. Besides, I am not at all sure that we sha'n't be enemies, Miss Fielding—worse luck."

"Oh, no, Mr. Phelps," Ruth said warmly. "Never *that!*"

"I don't know," he grumbled, hobbling on his crutches now while she walked toward the pony that was trailing his picket-rope. "You see, I'm pretty desperate about this gold strike. I've a good mind to go up there on the ridge and pull up all your stakes and throw 'em away."

"I wouldn't," she advised, smiling at him. "Mr. Flapjack Peters has what they call a 'sudden' temper; and his daughter, we found out coming over from Yucca, is a dead shot."

"I want a big slice of that ledge," said the young man, sighing. "Enough to make a showing in the Eastern share market."

"Let us wait and see. You know, you might be able to buy up us girls—three of us who hold the next three claims to yours and your sister's."

"Oh! Would you do it?" he demanded, brightening up.

"Perhaps. And we might wait for our money till you got the mine to working on a paying basis," Ruth said seriously. "Besides, there is Min Peters and her father. If you would take them into your company, so that they would have an income. Peters would be of great use to you, Mr. Phelps."

"Look here! I'll do anything fair," cried the young man. "It isn't that I am just after the money for the money's sake——"

"I understand," she told him, nodding. "We'll talk about it later. After we get reports on the ore that Peters took specimens of, all along the ledge. But I am afraid your sister's bringing workmen up here will start a stampede to Freeze-out."

"What do we care, as long as we get ours?" he cried, cheerfully. "Whew! The pater may think I am some good after all, before this business is over."

They mounted their ponies and rode to the camp. They followed the very route Ruth had come, but did not see the wounded wild horse again. Royal Phelps left her when they came in

sight of Freezeout and Ruth rode down into the camp alone.

She told the camp wrangler something about her adventure and the next day he went out with some of the Indians and punchers working for the outfit, and they ran down the black and white stallion.

However, Ruth had less interest in the wild stallion than she had in several other subjects. She quietly told the girls and Miss Cullam now about the possible discovery of a rich gold-bearing ledge so near camp. The Ardmore's were naturally greatly excited.

"Stingy!" cried Trix Davenport. "Why not tell us all before?"

"Because those who found it had first rights," Ruth said gravely. "I *did* stake out a claim for Rebecca. And I think Miss Cullam comes next."

"Oh, girls! *Real gold?*" gasped the teacher, while Rebecca was speechless with amazement.

There was certainly a small "rush" that evening for the gold-bearing ledge. Miss Cullam staked her claim and put up a notice next to Rebecca Frayne. All the other Ardmore's followed suit; even Ann Hicks was bitten by the fever of gold seeking.

They must have been watched, for not a few of the actors began to stake out claims as best they knew how and put up notices on the outskirts of

the line along the summit of the ridge followed by those first to know of the gold.

The Western men, the teamsters and others, laughed at the whole business and tried to tease Flapjack Peters; but they could get nothing out of him. Then some of them saw samples of the ore. The next morning found Freezeout Camp almost abandoned. Everybody who had not already done so was prowling around that half mile ridge of land, trying to stake claims as near to the top of the ledge as he could.

"And at that," Min said gloomily, "some of these fellers that caught on last may have the best of it. We don't know where the richest ore is yet."

Mr. Hammond and his director were nearly beside themselves. That day the company was so distraught that not a foot of film was made.

"How can I tell these crazy gold-hunters how to act like *real* gold hunters?" growled Grimes.

"If other people come flocking in the whole thing will be ruined," groaned Mr. Hammond.

Ruth Fielding did not believe that. She began to get a vision of what a real gold rush might mean. If they could get a *bona fide* stampede on the film she believed it would add a hundred per cent. to the value of "The Forty-Niners."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REAL THING

FREEZEOUT CAMP had awakened. Many of the old shacks and cabins had been repaired and made habitable for the purposes of the moving picture company. The largest dance hall—"The Palace of Pleasure" as it was called on the film—was just as Flapjack Peters remembered it, back in an earlier rush for placer gold to this spot.

Behind the rough bar, on the shelves, however, were only empty bottles, or, at most, those filled with colored water. Mr. Hammond had been careful to keep liquor out of the rejuvenated camp.

Flapjack Peters began to look like a different man. Whether it was his enforced abstinence from drink, or the fact that he saw ahead the possibility of wealth and the tall hat and white vest of which he had dreamed, he walked erect and looked every man straight in the eye.

"It gets me!" said Min to Ruth Fielding. "Pop ain't looked like this since I kin remember."

Two days of this excitement passed. The mo-

tion picture people "were getting down to earth again," as Mr. Grimes said, and the girls were beginning to expect Tom Cameron's return, when one noon the head of a procession was seen advancing through the nearest pass in the mountain range to the west. As Ruth and others watched, the procession began to wind down into the shallow gorge where the long "petered-out" placer diggings of Freezeout had been located, and where the rejuvenated town itself still stood.

"What under the sun can these people want?" gasped Mr. Hammond, the president of the film making company, to Ruth.

The girl of the Red Mill was in riding habit and she had her pony near at hand. "I'll ride up and see," she said.

But the instant she had sighted the first group of hurrying riders and the first wagon, she believed she understood. Word of the "strike" at the old camp had in some way become noised abroad.

Before Edith Phelps and the men she was to hire, with the Kingman lawyer's aid, reached the ledge her brother had located, other people had heard the news. These were the first of "the gold rush."

She spurred her horse up into the pass and ran the pony half a mile before she turned him and raced back to Mr. Hammond. She came with

flying hair and rosy cheeks to the worried president, bursting with an idea that had assailed her mind.

"Mr. Hammond! It is the greatest sight you ever saw! Get the camera man and hurry right up there to the mouth of the pass. Tell Mr. Grimes——"

"What do you mean?" snapped the president of the Alectrion Film Corporation. "Do you want to disorganize my whole company again?"

"I want to show you the greatest moving picture that ever was taken!" cried the girl of the Red Mill. "Oh, Mr. Hammond, you *must* take it! It must be incorporated in this film. Why! *it is the real thing!*"

"What is that? A joke?" he growled.

"No joke at all, I assure you," said Ruth, patiently. "You can see them coming through the pass—and beyond—for miles and miles. Men afoot, on horseback, in all kinds of wagons, on burros—oh, it is simply great! There are hundreds and hundreds of them. Why, Mr. Hammond! this Freezeout Camp is going to be a city before night!"

The chief reason why Mr. Hammond was a wealthy man and one of the powers in the motion picture world was because he could seize upon a new idea and appreciate its value in a moment. He knew that Ruth was a sane girl and that she

had judgment, as well as imagination. He gaped at her for a moment, perhaps; the next he was shouting for Mr. Grimes, for the camera men, for the horse wrangler, and for the "call-boy" to round up the company.

In half an hour a train set out for the pass, which met the first of the advance guard of gold seekers pouring down into the valley. The eager-faced men of all ages and apparently of all walks in life hurried on almost silently toward the spot where they were told a ledge of free gold had been found.

There were roughly dressed teamsters, herdsmen, nondescripts; there were Mexicans and Indians; there were well dressed city men—lawyers, doctors, other professional men, perhaps. Afterward Ruth read in an Arizona newspaper that such a typical stampede to any new-found gold or silver strike had not been seen in a decade.

A camera man set up his machine in a good spot and waited for the whole film company to drift along into the pass and join the real gold seekers that streamed down toward Freezeout.

This idea of Ruth Fielding's was the crowning achievement of her work on this film. The company came back to the cabins at evening, wearied and dust-choked, to find, as Ruth had prophesied, a veritable city on and near the creek.

The newcomers had rushed into the hills and

staked out their claims, some of them on the very fringe of the valley out of which the gold-bearing ledge rose. Of course, many of these claims would be worthless.

A lively buying and selling of the more worthless claims was already under way. With the stampede had come storekeepers and wagons of foodstuffs.

That night nobody slept. Mr. Hammond, realizing what this really meant, but feeling none of the itch for digging gold that most of those on the spot experienced, organized a local constabulary. A justice of the peace was found with intelligence enough, and enough knowledge of the state ordinance, to act as magistrate.

The men were called together early in the morning in the biggest dance hall and the vast majority —indeed, it was almost unanimous—voted that liquor selling be tabooed at Freezeout.

Several men of unsavory reputations who had come, like buzzards scenting the carrion from afar, were advised to leave town and stay away. They met other men of their stripe on the trail from Handy Gulch and other such places, and reported that Freezeout was going to be run "on a "Sunday-school basis"; there was nothing in it for the usual birds of prey that infest such camps.

In a few hours the party coming from Kingman with Edith Phelps and the lawyer she had

engaged, arrived. The camp about the ridge grew and expanded in every direction. Most of the claimholders slept on their claims, fearing trickery. Shafts were sunk. The Phelps crowd began to set up a small crusher and cyaniding plant that had been trucked over the trails.

The moving picture was finished at last, before either Mr. Grimes or Mr. Hammond quite lost their minds. Several of the men of the company broke their contract with the Alectrion Film Corporation and would remain at the diggings. They believed their claims were valuable.

Tom had returned before this with reports from the assayer and copies of the filing of the claims. The specimen from Ruth's claim showed one hundred and eighty dollars to the ton. The ore from Flapjack Peters and Min's claims were, after all, the richest of any of their party, though farther down the ledge. The ore taken from those claims showed two hundred dollars to the ton.

"We're rich—or we're goin' to be," Min declared to the Ardmore girls and Miss Cullam, the last night the Eastern visitors were to remain in Freezeout. "That lawyer of R'yal Phelps is goin' to let pop have some money and we're both goin' to send for clo'es—some duds! Wish you could wait and see me togged up just like a Fourth o' July pony in the parade."

"I wish we could, Min!" cried Jennie Stone.

"You shall come East to visit me later," Ruth declared. "Won't you, Min? We'll all show you a good time there."

"As though you hadn't showed me the best time I ever had already," choked the Yucca girl. "But I'll come—after I git used to my new clo'es."

"Have you and your father really made a bargain with Royal Phelps?" Miss Cullam asked, as much interested in the welfare of the suddenly enriched girl as her pupils.

"Yes, Ma'am. Pop's going to have an office in the new company, too. And Mr. Phelps is goin' to git backin' from the East and buy up all the adjoinin' claims that he can."

"He'll have all ours, in time," said Helen. "That's lots better than each of us trying to develop her little claim. Oh, that Phelps man is smart."

"And what about Edith?" demanded the honest Ruth. "We've got to praise her, too."

There was silence. Finally, Miss Cullam said dryly: "She seems to have no very enthusiastic friends in the audience, Miss Fielding."

"Oh, well," Ruth said, laughing, "we none of us like Edith."

"How about liking her brother?" asked Jennie Stone, and she seemed to say it pointedly.

CHAPTER XXV

UNCLE JABEZ IS CONVERTED

It was some months afterward. The growing town of Cheslow had long since developed the moving picture fever, and two very nice theatres had been built.

One evening in the largest of these theatres an old, gray-faced and grim-looking man sat beside a very happy, pretty girl and watched the running off of the seven-reel feature, "The Forty-Niners."

If the old man came in under duress and watched the first flashes on the screen with scorn, he soon forgot all his objections and sat forward in his seat to watch without blinking the scenes thrown, one after another, on the sheet.

It really was a wonderfully fine picture. And thrilling!

"Hi mighty!" ejaculated Uncle Jabez Potter, unwillingly enough and under his breath in the middle of the picture, "d'ye mean to say you done all that, Niece Ruth?"

"I helped," said Ruth, modestly.

"Why, it's as natcheral as the stepstun, I swan!" gasped the miller. "I can 'member hearin' many of the men that went out there in the airly days tell about what it was like. This is jest like they said it was. I don't see how ye did it—an' you was never born even, when them things was like that."

"Don't say that, Uncle Jabez," Ruth declared. "For I saw a little bit of the real thing. They write me that Freezeout Camp has taken on a new lease of life. Mr. Phelps says," and she blushed a little, but it was dark and nobody saw it, "that we are all going to make a lot of money out of the Freezeout Ledge."

But Uncle Jabez Potter was not listening. He was enthralled again in the picture of old days in the mining country. It seemed as though, at last, the old miller was converted to the belief that his grand niece knew a deal more than he had given her credit for. To his mind, that she knew how to make money was the more important thing.

The final flash of the film reflected on the screen passed and Uncle Jabez and Ruth rose to go. It was dark in the theatre and the girl led the old man out by the hand. Somehow he clung to her hand more tightly than was usually his custom.

" 'Tis a wonderful thing, Niece Ruth, I allow," he said when they came out into the lamplight of

Cheslow's main street. "I—I dunno. You young folks seems ter have got clean ahead of us older ones. There's things that I ain't never hearn tell of, I guess."

Ruth Fielding laughed. "Why, Uncle Jabez," she said, "the world is just full of such a number of things that neither of us knows much about that that's what makes it worth living in."

"I dunno; I dunno," he muttered. "Guess you've got to know most of 'em now you've gone to that college."

"I am beginning to get a taste of some of them," she cried. "You know I have three more years to spend at Ardmore before I can take a degree."

"Huh! Wal, it don't re'lly seem as though knowin' so *much* did a body any good in this world. I hev got along on what little they knocked inter my head at deestrict school. And I've made a livin' an' something more. But I never could write a movin' picture scenario, that's true. And if there's so much money in 'em——"

"Mr. Hammond writes me that he's sure there is going to be a lot of money in this one. The State rights are bringing the corporation in thousands. Of course, my share is comparatively small; but I feel already amply paid for my six weeks spent in Arizona."

That, however, is somewhat ahead of the story. Uncle Jabez' conversion was bound to be a slow

process. When the party returned from the West the person gladdest to see Ruth Fielding was Aunt Alvirah.

The strong and vigorous girl was rather shocked to find the little old woman so feeble. She did not get around the kitchen or out of doors nearly as actively as had been her wont.

"Oh, my back! an' oh, my bones! Seems ter me, my pretty," she said, sinking into her rocking chair, "that things is sort o' slippin' away from me. I feel that I am a-growin' lazy."

"Lazy! You couldn't be lazy, Aunt Alvirah," laughed the girl of the Red Mill.

"Oh, yes; I 'spect I could," said Aunt Alvirah, nodding. "This here M'lissy your uncle's hired to help do the work, is a right capable girl. And she's made me lazy. If I undertake ter do a thing, she's there before me an' has got it done."

"You need to sit still and let others do the work now," Ruth urged.

"I dunno. What good am I to Jabez Potter? He didn't take me out o' the poorhouse fifteen year or more ago jest ter sit around here an' play lady. No, ma'am!"

"Oh, Aunty!"

"I dunno but I'd better be back there."

"You'd better not let Uncle Jabez hear you say so," Ruth cried. "Maybe I don't always know just how Uncle Jabez feels about me; but I k[illegible]

how he looks at *you,* Aunt Alvirah. Don't dare suggest leaving the Red Mill."

The little old woman looked at her steadily, and there were the scant tears of age in the furrows of her face.

"I shall be leavin' it some day soon, my pretty. 'Tis a beautiful place here—the Red Mill. But there is a Place Prepared. I'm on my way there, Ruthie. But, thanks be, I kin cling with one hand to the happy years here because of you, while my other hand's stretched out for the feel of a Hand that you can't see, my pretty. After all, Ruthie, no matter how we live, or what we do, our livin' is jest a preparation for our dyin'."

Nor was this lugubrious. Aunt Alvirah was no long-visaged, unhappy creature. The other girls loved to call on her. Helen was at the Red Mill this summer quite as much as ever. Jennie Stone and Rebecca Frayne both visited Ruth after their return from Freezeout Camp.

It was a cheerful and gay life they led. There much much chatter of the happenings at Freezeout, and of the work at the new gold mining camp. Min Peters' scrawly letters were read and re-read; her pertinent comments on all that went on were always worth reading and were sometimes actually funny.

"I wish you could see pop," she wrote once. "I

mean Mr. Henry James Peters. If ever there was a big toad in a little puddle, it's him!

"He's got a hat so shiny that it dazzles you when he's out in the sun. It's awful uncomfortable for him to wear, I know. But he wouldn't give it up—nor the white vest and the dinky patent leather shoes he's got on right now—for all the gold you could name.

"And I'm getting as bad. I sit around in a flowery gown, and there's a girl come here to work in the hotel that's trimming my nails and fixing my hands up something scandalous. Man-curing, she calls it.

"But the fine clothes has made another man of pop; and I expect they'll improve yours truly a whole lot. When we get real used to them, sometime we'll come East and see you. I can pretty near trust pop already to go into a rumhole here without expecting to see him come out again orey-eyed.

"Not that he's shown any dispersition to drink again. He says his position is too important in the Freezeout Ledge Gold Mining Company for any foolishness. And I'll tell you right now, he's the only member of the company now that that Edie girl's gone home that ever *is* dressed up on the job. Mr. Phelps works like as though he'd been used to it all his life.

"Let me tell you. *His* pop's been out here to

see him. 'Looking over prospects' he called it. But you bet you it was to see what sort of a figure his son was cutting here among sure-enough men.

"I reckon the old gentleman was satisfied. I seen them riding over the hills together, as well as wandering about the diggings. One night while he was here we had a big dance—a regular hoe-down—in the big hall.

"This here big-bug father of Mr. Royal danced with me. What do you know about that? 'What do you think of my son?' says he to me while we was dancing.

"Says I: 'I think he's got almost as much sense as though he was borned and brought up in Arizona. And he knows a whole lot more than most of our boys does.' 'Why,' says he to me, 'you've got a lot of good sense yourself, ain't you?' I guess Mr. Royal had been cracking me up to his father at that.

"Mr. Phelps—the younger, I mean—takes dinner with us most every Sunday; and he treats me just as nice and polite as though I'd been used to having my hair done up and my hands man-cured all my life."

This letter arrived at the Red Mill on a day when Jennie and Rebecca were there, as well as Helen and her twin. There was more to Min Peters long epistle; but as Jennie Stone said:

"That's enough to show how the wind is blowing. Why, I had no idea that Phelps boy would ever show such good sense as to 'shine up' to Min!"

"The dear girl!" sighed Ruth. "She has the making of a fine woman in her. I don't blame Royal Phelps for liking her."

"I imagine Edie took back a long tale of woe to her father and that he went out there to 'look over' Min more than he did gold prospects," Rebecca said, tartly. "Of course, she's awfully uncouth, and Royal Phelps is a gentleman——"

"Thus speaks the oracle!" exclaimed Helen, briskly. "Rebecca believes in putting signs on the young men of our best families who go into such regions: 'Beware the dog.'"

"Well, he is really nice," complained Rebecca, who could not easily be cured of snobbishness.

"I hope there are others," announced Tom, swinging idly in the hammock.

"Fishing for compliments, I declare," laughed Jennie, poking him.

"Why, he's des the cutest, nicest 'ittle sing," cooed his sister, rocking the big fellow in the hammock.

"It's been an awful task for you to bring him up, Nell," drawled Jennie. "But after all, I don't know but it's been worth while. He's almost human. If they'd drowned him when he was little

and only raised you, I don't know but it would have been a calamity."

"Oh, cat's foot!" snapped Tom, rising from the hammock with a bound. "You girls mostly give me a woful pain. You're too biggity. Pretty soon there won't be any comfort living in the world with you 'advanced women.' The men will have to go off to another planet and start all over again.

"Who'll mend your socks and press your neckties?" laughed Ruth from her seat on the piazza railing.

"Thanks be! If there are no women the necessity for ties and socks will be done away with. And certain sure most of you college girls will never know how to do either."

"Hear him!" cried Jennie.

"Infamous!" gasped Rebecca.

"You wait, young man," laughed his sister. "I'll make you pay for that."

But Tom recovered his temper and grinned at them. Then he glanced up at Ruth.

"Come on down, Ruth, and take a walk, will you? Come off your perch."

The girl of the Red Mill laughed at him; but she did as he asked. "Come on, I'm game."

"No more walks," groaned Jennie. "I scarcely cast a shadow now I'm getting so thin. That saddle work in Arizona pulled me down till I'm scarcely bigger than a thread of cotton."

Ruth and Tom started off to go along the river road, the two who had first been friends in Cheslow and around the Red Mill. There was a smile on Ruth's lips; but Tom looked serious. Neither of them dreamed of the strenuous adventures the future held in store for them, as will be related in our next volume, entitled "Ruth Fielding in the Red Cross; or, Doing Her Bit for Uncle Sam."

The other young folks, remaining in the shaded farmyard, looked after them. Jennie jerked out:

"Mighty—nice—looking—couple, eh?"

Nobody made any rejoinder, but all three of Ruth's friends gazed after her and her companion.

The couple had halted on the bridge. They were talking earnestly, and Ruth rested one hand on the railing and turned to face the young man. His big brown hand covered hers, that lay on the rail. Ruth did not withdraw it.

"Mated!" drawled Jennie Stone, and the others nodded understandingly.

THE END

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